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2025 Approved Mechanics for Free and Scrimmage Kick Situations Required for use in all SDHSAA Contests – Deviations from the NFHS Officials Manual (Approved, Updated 04.28.2025)

Starting in 2025, South Dakota will be using state specific mechanics on free and scrimmage kicks which are different from what you will find in the NFHS football game officials manual. Below are the mechanics SDHSAA requires crews to use. The rationale for the changes on free kicks is to have the Chain Wing and Away Wing, who are accustomed to trailing the play, looking for blocks in front of the runner, and spotting the ball to do that on free kick plays, just like all other scrimmage plays. For clarity, we will number the players of K's team (1, 2, 3, 4, for 9-Man) or (1,2,3,4,5 for 11-Man) from the outside in and will be officiating blocks made by those players on the kickoff. *(See field diagram at the end of free kick section)*

The rationale for the change on scrimmage kicks is to put the Back Judge in better position to see the catch/muff of the return man and then be in better position to transition to watching blocks in front of the runner.

Free Kick Reminder- Since the play clock for a free kick does not start until the Referee's ready-for play signal and whistle, a kick should never be permitted by the crew without the proper number of players on the field for both teams.

FREE KICKS

REFEREE: Pre-RFP (ready for play) Positioning and Responsibilities

- The Referee will take a position in the middle of the field on Team R's goal line and should adjust their position between the hash marks depending on the position of the deepest receiver(s).
- Once all crew members are in position and have signaled, they are ready, the Referee will sound the whistle and signal ready-for-play.

Play Coverage

- The Referee will ensure that Team K has at least (three players in 9-Man or four players in 11- Man) on either side of the kicker at the time of the kick – if not, Referee will flag the play and shut it down immediately.
- If the kick threatens the goal line, the Referee should hold their position to make decisions on whether a touchback has occurred or whether the momentum exception should be applied on a catch or recovered ball.
- If the ball is touched by a Team R player in the Referee's primary coverage area, the Referee will wind the game clock.
- If the receiver advances with the ball, the Referee will continue up field while observing blocks in front of the ball carrier and in the middle of the field until the ball reaches the (R-20 in 9-Man or the R-30 in 11-Man). As the ball carrier reaches the (R-20 or R-30), the Referee should move their

focus to players trailing the play and continue up field behind the deepest combination of Team R and Team K players.

UMPIRE: Pre-RFP Positioning and Responsibilities

- a. The Umpire will take their position off the field on the sideline side of the press box, straddling the extended Team R restraining line (the 50-yard line on 100-yard field or the 40-yard line on 80-yard field).
- b. The Umpire will ensure that all players and coaching personnel are clear of the restricted area. Once the correct number of players have been counted, the Umpire will raise their hand to indicate to the Referee that they are ready.
- c. The Umpire has the responsibility of Team R's restraining line, including whether the ball has reached the line before it is touched by a Team K player. The Umpire has the shared responsibility to determine whether the kicker made a popup kick and must also be aware if players from either team block before the ball has reached Team R's restraining line.

Play Coverage

- a. After the kick occurs without foul, the Umpire will direct their attention on the initial blocks made by the inside (3&4 in 9-Man or 4&5 in 11-Man) players on their side of the field.
- b. Once the Team K players pass the Umpire's position, the Umpire will diagonal into the field to the hash mark moving 10 yards downfield while doing so. They should end up on the R30 yard line in 9-Man or the R40 yard line in 11-Man.
- c. As the ball is being returned, the Umpire will observe action from the middle of the field to the hash in front of the runner. They should be especially alert to Team R players moving back toward their own goal line for a suspect crack back block.
- d. The Umpire should remain at least 15 to 20 yards in advance of the ball carrier as the play advances. They have secondary responsibility for coverage at the goal line.
- e. When the play ends, the Umpire will move to the ball and replace it with the proper ball for the next series or try.

CHAIN WING: Pre-RFP Positioning and Responsibilities

- a. The Chain Wing starting position is off the field on the sideline opposite the press box, at the goal line, but they can move up to the 10- or 20-yard line depending on the ability of the kicker as determined in pre-game warmups. They should be about 10 yards behind the player who is looking to return the kick.
- b. The Chain Wing will ensure that all players and coaching personnel are clear of the restricted area. Once the correct number of players have been counted, the Chain Wing will raise their hand to indicate to the Referee that they are ready.

Play Coverage

- a. After the kick, the Chain Wing will direct their attention on the initial blocks made by the outside (1&2 in 9-Man or 2&3 in 11-Man) players on their side of the field.
- b. If the ball is touched by a Team R player in their primary coverage area, the Chain Wing will wind the game clock.
- c. For returns on their half of the field, the Chain Wing is responsible for the spot for kicks out of bounds, blocks at the point of attack and forward progress all the way to the goal line.
- d. For returns on the opposite side of the field, the Chain Wing is responsible for blocks in the middle of the field away from the ball.
- e. When the play ends, the Chain Wing will mark forward progress on their side of the field. They will mirror the progress spot and clean up around the runner if the ball is on the opposite side of the field.

AWAY WING: Pre-RFP Positioning and Responsibilities

- a. The Away Wing starting position is off the field on the press box sideline, at the goal line, but they can move up to the 10- or 20-yard line depending on the ability of the kicker as determined in pre-game warmups. They should be about 10 yards behind the player who is looking to return the kick.
- b. The Away Wing will ensure that all players and coaching personnel are clear of the restricted area. Once the correct number of players have been counted, they will raise their hand to indicate to the Referee that they are ready.

Play Coverage

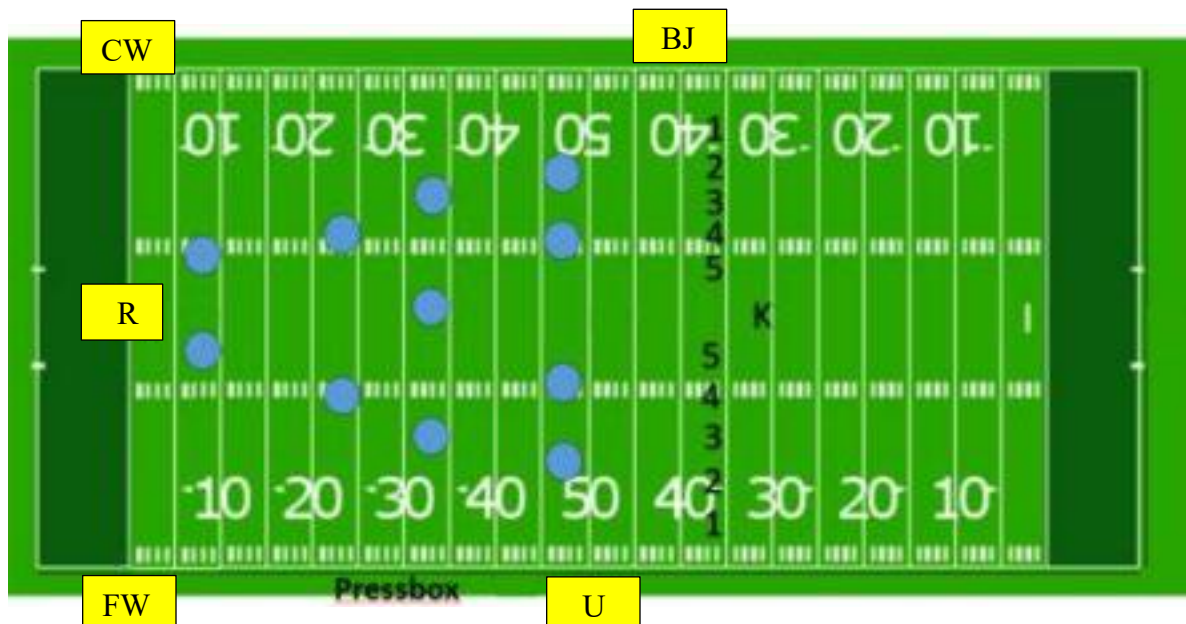
- a. After the kick, the Away Wing will direct their attention on the initial blocks made by the outside (1&2 in 9-Man or 2&3 in 11-Man) players on their side of the field.
- b. If the ball is touched by a Team R player in their primary coverage area, the Away Wing will wind the game clock.
- c. For returns on their half of the field, the Away Wing is responsible for the spot for kicks out of bounds, blocks at the point of attack and forward progress all the way to the goal line.
- d. For returns on the opposite side of the field, the Away Wing is responsible for blocks in the middle of the field away from the ball.
- e. When the play ends, the Away Wing will mark forward progress on their side of the field. The Away Wing will mirror the progress spot and clean up around the runner if the ball is on the opposite side of the field.

BACK JUDGE: Pre-RFP Positioning and Responsibilities

- a. The Back Judge will start in the middle of the field with the kicker. They will then hand the ball to the kicker and give instructions to raise their hand when ready and look to the Referee for the ready-for-play whistle and signal.
- b. From their position in the middle of the field, the Back Judge will count the Team K players and then move to their position off the field opposite the press box sideline straddling the extended Team K restraining line (the 40-yard line on a 100-yard field or the 30-yard line on an 80-yard field). After reaching their position, the Back Judge will raise their hand to indicate to the Referee that they are ready.
- c. The Back Judge has the responsibility of Team K's restraining line, including whether any Team K player has encroached the line before the ball has been kicked. They have the shared responsibility to determine whether the kicker made a pop-up kick and must be aware if players from either team block before the ball has reached Team R's restraining line. They should also be alert as to whether the kicker is blocked before they advance five yards downfield.

Play Coverage

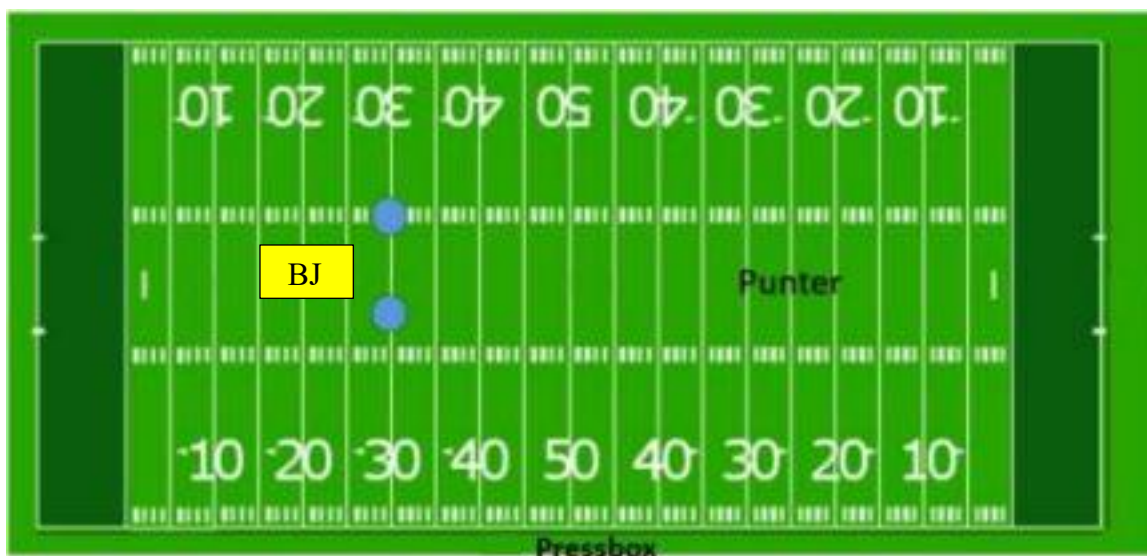
- a. After the kick occurs without foul, the Back Judge will direct their attention on the initial blocks made by the inside (3&4 in 9-Man or 4&5 in 11-Man) players on their side of the field.
- b. Once it has been seen that a deep kick has been made, the Back Judge will diagonal into the field to the hash mark moving 10 yards downfield while doing so. They should end up at midfield, which is the 40-yard line in 9-Man or the 50-yard line in 11-Man.
- c. As the ball is being returned, the Back Judge will observe action in the middle of the field in front of the runner. They should be especially alert to Team R players moving back toward their own goal line for potential blind side blocks. The Back Judge should remain at least 20 yards in advance of the ball carrier as the play advances. They have the primary responsibility for coverage at the goal line and should be straddling the goal line in advance of the runner crossing it.
- d. If the play ends at the goal line, the Back Judge will rule on forward progress. e. When the play ends prior to reaching the goal line, the Back Judge may assist with retrieving the proper ball to be put in play for the new series or try.



SCRIMMAGE KICKS

BACK JUDGE: Pre-Snap Positioning and Responsibilities

- If there is one return man, the Back Judge will start 7 yards behind the return man and just off their shoulder on the wide side of the field. He should never start outside the hash, even if the one return man is outside the hash.
- If there are two returners, the Back Judge will split the two returners and be 7 yards behind them.
(see pic below)



Play Coverage

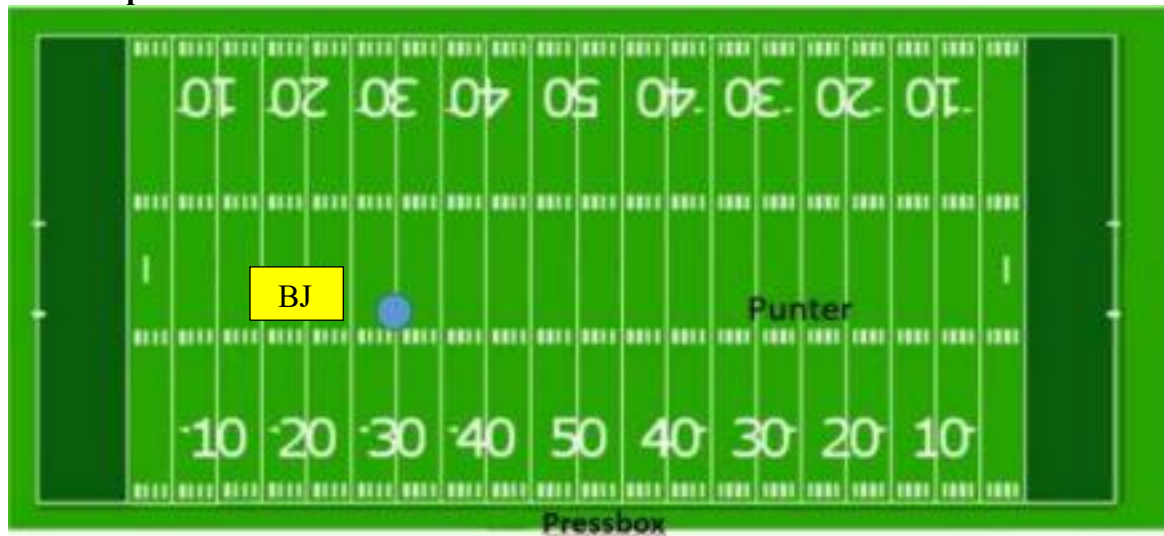
- Off the foot, the Back Judge will determine the depth and direction of the kick and then concentrate on the receiver(s). If the kick will threaten the goal line, the Back Judge shall retreat to the goal line and stay there to see if the ball breaks the plane, resulting in a touch back. They should be alert for a legal or illegal fair catch signal.
- As the return man moves to catch the kick, the Back Judge should move opposite the return man and try and be 7 yards behind and 7 yards to the side of the return man as he attempts to catch the ball. Back Judge must see if the return man touches the ball or if they attempt to catch it.

- c. The Back Judge should use good timing before blowing the play dead on a fair catch. They should always anticipate that the ball will be muffed and must make sure the ball is caught before sounding the whistle.
- d. If the Back Judge recognizes that the kick will land behind the receiver, they will retreat backwards to keep the ball in front of them. Back Judge must be at the goal line if the kick threatens it.
- e. The Back Judge will mark the end of the kick with their bean bag.
- f. If the kick is returned, the Back Judge will follow behind the runner, being responsible for blocks in front of the runner.
- g. Following the conclusion of the play, the Back Judge will help clean up behind the end of the play and will assist with getting a new ball spotted if a change of possession occurs.
- h. Note the initial alignment of the Back Judge with the punter in examples 1&2.

Example #1



Example #2



MECHANICS CHANGE – SCRIMAGE KICKS

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Simple method to remember:

If the line official is looking at the referee's back, he should be underneath the upright.

Back Judge and Line Judge / Linesman - Take positions inside the limit line.

1. Rule on success or failure of field goal and try attempts. Official nearest ball rules on play with the other official reflecting the signal.
2. Be alert for ball striking an upright or a cross bar. If ball strikes crossbar, the BJ is responsible for the ruling.
3. Break out into position to cover end zone in the event of a fake attempt and be ready to cover passes and runs as usual.
4. The Back Judge will move to cover the end line and the Linesman/Line Judge will move to cover the sideline deep in the end zone.

Linesman or Line Judge: Take regular position, responsible for:

1. Normal sideline responsibilities;
2. Quick passes and helping out with blocking on linebackers;
3. Covering play on short receiver on short field goal attempts;
4. The area behind the Umpire to the two deep officials.

Umpire - Adjust to position seldom more than 7 yards deep, observing action on long snapper. If kicking team fakes and play moves Referee's side of the field, move to a position to help cover the goal line.

Referee - Responsible for action on kicker and holder. Basic position is one to two yards to the rear and two to three yards to the side of the kicker facing the holder.



MECHANICS CHANGE – SCRIMMAGE KICKS

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