



2026 and 2027 FOOTBALL GAME OFFICIALS MANUAL POINTS OF EMPHASIS

PENALTY COMMUNICATION

Communication among the officiating crew is vital when processing penalty enforcement. From the time the flag is thrown, until the umpire steps off the penalty, a breakdown in communication among the crew can turn a routine penalty enforcement into a train wreck.

All fouls must be reported to the press box and both coaches. The foul must also be communicated to the entire officiating crew so each game official can perform his or her role in penalty enforcement. When a flag is thrown, the calling game official must notify the referee and the game official on the chain side as soon as the play ends. The chain-side game official must hold the chains and down box in place, and the referee prepares for penalty enforcement. If necessary, use three short whistle blasts after the ball becomes dead to alert the referee. Wing officials who throw a flag for a dead-ball foul prior to the snap should jog toward the middle of the field to report the foul while continuing to observe players for potential retaliation. If multiple flags are down, game officials should meet to discuss what each observed before any signal is given to the press box.

Reporting the Foul

The referee must receive an accurate report from the calling game official. Depending on crew preference, the report may include only the foul and offending team or a brief description of what was observed. When applicable, include the status of the ball or whether a player involved was an eligible receiver. Teams should be identified by offense or defense rather than jersey color whenever possible. Reporting procedures should be reviewed during the pregame conference.

Coach Communication

Unless the penalty is automatically declined or part of a double foul, the referee must present the penalty options to the appropriate captain or coach. The explanation should be brief, accurate and courteous. The umpire should listen to ensure the proper options are given. The wing official on the penalized team's sideline should inform the coach of the offending player's number and explain the foul in simple terms. Do not guess the player's number if it is unknown.

Enforcement

After the referee determines whether the penalty is accepted or declined, the decision must be communicated to the crew. If accepted, the umpire must know the enforcement spot, distance and direction of enforcement. The referee should then move clear of players, face the press box, stand stationary, and signal the foul and the offending team using the proper signals.

FORWARD PROGRESS

Forward progress is the same regardless of the level of play. The challenge officials will always face is noting two places at once: The spot where and if the runner is down by rule and the spot where the forward-most point of the ball is when that happens.

Forward progress is the end of advancement of the ball toward the opponent's goal (2-15-1). It is the spot indicated by the forward-most point of the ball when it becomes dead by rule. In the vast majority of cases it is obvious the ball has become dead by rule. A runner is down when any part of the body other than a hand or foot touches the ground. The ankle or wrist are considered part of the foot or hand, respectively, and do not make a runner down. However, a runner is not down if any part of the body, other than a hand or foot, touches another player (teammate or opponent) who is lying on the ground. The ball also becomes dead by rule when a ball carrier steps out of bounds, the ball carrier's helmet comes completely off, or an inadvertent whistle is blown.

When a player is knocked forward when being tackled as is often the case, the likely progress spot is where the ball meets the turf. If, however, the player is grabbed in such a manner that the knees touch the ground before the player falls forward, the spot is where the ball was when the knee went down. There are too many possibilities to describe, but the covering game officials must not only be able to discern when the runner is down by rule, but also where the ball is when that happens.

When the quarterback is sacked, there is often a substantial difference (3 to 5 yards) between the spot the quarterback is contacted and where the quarterback goes down. The referee usually must get that spot, and if the referee spots the ball where it landed, you know there was an error.

Sideline plays: If the runner steps out of bounds, the forward progress spot is the foremost point of the ball when the runner touches the ground out of bounds. That applies regardless of whether the ball is held inside or outside the sideline. When a runner's foot touches the sideline, game officials will almost always mark the ball where the foot touches the sideline. That often is a reasonably correct spot, but the true spot is where the foremost point of the ball was when the foot hit the line. The covering game official should know how the runner was holding the ball. If it was in the runner's outside arm, the rearmost point of the ball was probably about the out-of-bounds foot. If the ball was in the runner's inside arm, the "foot spot" may have been in advance of the ball. In the vast majority of cases, the difference between the spots described above will be inconsequential, but when the runner goes out of bounds near the stake, the wrong spot may deny a properly earned first down or may incorrectly award one.

Another difficult spot to determine is when the runner is airborne when crossing the sideline. Forward progress is where the forward-most part of the ball crosses the plane of the sideline, not where the ball is when the runner first touches out of bounds.

The judgment call: The challenging aspect of forward progress is the runner's advancement can end without any of the aforementioned events occurring. The exact moment the play has ended becomes a judgment call. When the runner's voluntary movement is stopped, the whistle should be blown. If the runner is physically controlled and held stationary, it's a very simple call. If the runner is carried back and placed on the ground, then the only additional task is ascertaining they won't break free from the tackle.

The challenge for game officials is when the runner is pushed back (not carried) and appears to be free to advance. That scenario is inconsistently officiated, probably because there is virtually no documentation on how to deal with it. If such a runner is immediately able to break free and continue to run, the ball clearly should remain live. However, if the runner is contacted again and brought down at the spot, then broke free, the runner is entitled to forward progress at the farthest advance. Some game officials will deny forward progress because the runner broke contact with the defense.

When a runner appears to be stopped, the runner should be given an opportunity to escape if such an opportunity exists. If the runner is stopped, forward progress is marked at the ball's farthest advance. If the runner breaks free and renews the charge, or runs backward of the runner's own accord, progress is marked at the farthest ball point of the subsequent advance.

The most judgmental scenario occurs when a runner breaks free and renews this charge, but staggers and goes down without further contact by the defense. In this situation, "down by rule" is a factor. If the game official judges the runner went down as a result of the initial contact, then the runner is entitled to forward

progress at the spot where first contact occurred. If not, forward progress is marked at the spot where the runner went down.

When a runner is taken backward, the spirit of the rule entitles the runner to the spot where original contact occurred unless the runner is subsequently able to move forward under the runner's own power. Whether or not the defense continually maintains contact with the runner is not a factor.

The down side: The forward progress rule is designed to benefit the offense by giving them the yardage they have properly earned, but there is one situation where the rule works against the team in possession. A player who intercepts a ball in the end zone near the goal line and is tackled from behind so that the progress spot is in the field of play is "entitled" to the farthest most spot. That spot will be significantly behind the 20-yard line where the ball would be placed on a touchback.

FREE-KICK COVERAGE

Plays with free kicks expose players to some of the hardest collisions of any football play. The speed of closure between kicking and receiving team players needs to be a focus of each free kick, and emphasis on legal blocking is crucial to help enhance both player safety and fair play.

To provide comprehensive coverage of players during a free kick, game officials should divide the players up on each side of the kicker and key on the action of those players. The widest two players on each side of the kicking team formation are the responsibility of the deepest sideline official. These game officials should remain stationary unless forced to move until the kick is possessed, observing their players as they progress down the field.

The other kicking team players (excluding the two widest players on each side of the kicking team formation) are the responsibility of the game officials on the kicking team restraining line and the receiving team restraining line. Each of those game officials should observe those players on their side of the field in that formation as the players progress down the field. Additionally, the game official on the kicking team's restraining line is responsible for action against the kicker.

The referee is responsible for ensuring at least four players are on each side of the kicker when the ball is kicked. The referee is also responsible for determining momentum or safety on kicks possessed inside of the 5-yard line. When in doubt, the kick should be ruled as a touchback.

****FINAL – 5-1-26**

