



2026 FOOTBALL POINTS OF EMPHASIS

FLAGRANT AND UNSPORTSMANLIKE FOULS

In high school football, flagrant fouls and unsportsmanlike fouls are serious rule violations that threaten player safety and the integrity of the game. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) places a strong emphasis on sportsmanship and risk minimization because players are still developing physically and emotionally. Game officials play a critical role in identifying and penalizing these fouls to ensure the game is played fairly, safely, and with respect for all participants.

Flagrant fouls are the most severe type of personal foul in high school football. These actions involve intentional, reckless or excessively violent behavior that shows a clear disregard for the safety of others. Flagrant fouls are fouls so severe or extreme that they place an opponent in danger of serious injury. They may also involve violations that are extremely or persistently vulgar or abusive. Examples include fighting, maliciously targeting the head or neck area, striking an opponent, or delivering a violent illegal blindside block or late hit. When a flagrant foul occurs, the penalty is 15 yards and automatic disqualification of the offending player. Removing players who commit flagrant fouls helps prevent serious injuries and stops situations from escalating into further violence.

In high school football (NFHS rules), unsportsmanlike fouls are non-contact fouls that violate standards of fair play, respect and sportsmanship, while personal fouls are fouls that involve illegal personal contact. Unsportsmanlike fouls are penalized even if they don't directly affect the play, and while they may not be physically violent, they harm the tone of the game. Common examples include:

- taunting,
- threatening gestures or posturing,
- racist comments,
- trash talking,
- excessive or choreographed celebrations,
- aggressively spiking, spinning or throwing the ball high into the air,
- using profanity,
- spitting,
- arguing with game officials, or
- throwing equipment.

Unsportsmanlike fouls can be committed by players, coaches or other team personnel. Each unsportsmanlike foul results in a 15-yard penalty, and a player who commits two such fouls in one game is disqualified.

Game officials must consistently penalize both flagrant and unsportsmanlike fouls to maintain control of the game. When these actions go unpunished, players may feel emboldened to act more aggressively or disrespectfully, increasing the risk of fights and injuries. Proper enforcement sends a clear message that dangerous or unsportsmanlike behavior will not be tolerated, helping to keep emotions in check and the game orderly.

Penalizing flagrant and unsportsmanlike fouls is important because high school football is about more than winning; it is about teaching values such as respect, discipline, and responsibility. By enforcing these rules,

game officials protect players, promote good sportsmanship, and set a positive example for young athletes. Consistent enforcement helps ensure that high school football remains a safe, competitive and educational experience for everyone involved.

HELPING THE RUNNER

Collegiate and professional football rules allow offensive players to pile in behind and directly push the runner. The “tush push” is an example of such a play often used at those levels. Although direct contact with the runner is illegal under NFHS rules, these plays are becoming more common in the high school game. As guardians of the game, it is imperative that all stakeholders work together to remove “illegally helping the runner” from our high school game.

Administrators, coaches and football game officials all have a responsibility to know, respect and teach/enforce the NFHS rules of high school football. Football is a vigorous, physical contact game and, for this reason, much attention is given to minimizing risk of injury to all players. Each respective rules code (NFL, NCAA and NFHS) has rules that coincide with the physical development of competing athletes and their goals for the game.

The NFHS Football Rules Committee focuses on minimizing risk and supporting a balance between offensive and defensive rules. Illegally helping the runner to assist forward progress presents a risk of injury to the runner and others. The additional momentum to a particular offensive player, as opposed to the pile, swings the balance toward the offense in a manner not intended by the rules.

Football game officials should be aware of ruling plays dead when a runner’s forward progress is clearly stopped, and they should penalize actions by offensive teammates who directly contact the runner and push, pull or lift the runner forward in a clear and obvious attempt to keep the runner’s progress moving forward.

Of course, not all contact with the runner is illegal. Game officials should observe and judge an offensive teammate’s actions and the runner’s progress to determine whether a foul for illegally helping the runner is warranted. Although a foul can occur on any play, game officials should especially be alert for this type of action on short-yardage plays near the goal line and line to gain. Remember, pushing the pile is legal; direct contact while pushing, pulling, lifting of the runner to assist forward progress is not.

The NFHS Coaches Code of Ethics states: “Coaches shall master the contest rules and shall teach the rules to their team members. Coaches shall not seek an advantage by circumvention of the spirit or letter of the rules. Coaches have a tremendous influence, for good or ill, on the education of the student, and thus shall never place the value of winning above the value of instilling the highest ideals of character.”

If school administrators/athletic directors truly believe that activities are an extension of the classroom, they must be actively involved with programs they supervise and redirect coaches when they observe them teaching prohibited tactics.

Removing “illegally helping the runner” from high school football will, at times, be met with resistance, especially considering the visibility of this type of play at other levels of the game. School administrative support of football game officials, re-focus of coaches and education of players will lead to a smooth transition. All stakeholders must remain committed to trying to minimize risk to all players and maintain the balance between offensive and defensive play.

SIDELINE MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

Sideline management has become a recurring “point of emphasis” because it improves game safety by keeping game officials, players, coaching staff and other team personnel clear of the active game play areas. It promotes good sportsmanship and professionalism across all levels of play and also prevents unnecessary delays and confrontations that can impact game flow and fairness.

The sideline includes the team area and any restricted zones around the field where players and coaches stand during the game. Game officials expect this area to be organized and kept clear of unnecessary personnel. Coaches must remain in the designated team area when interacting with game officials, especially for rule discussions. Leaving that area to step onto the field or challenge calls results in an automatic unsportsmanlike conduct foul. Coaches are generally only allowed to step toward the sideline (into the working area, often a marked 2-yard border) to call offensive or defensive signals after play has stopped.

Game officials are instructed to strictly enforce NFHS Football Rules when the following behaviors are observed:

- Coaches or team personnel entering the field of play to dispute rulings or address game officials outside the coaching area.
- Prolonged or excessive celebrations or demonstrations that carry onto the field.
- Failing to maintain professional behavior. Coaches and team personnel are expected to set a standard for sportsmanship.
- Game officials shall call fouls for violations of sideline control when they are observed.
- Infractions such as approaching game officials with devices (e.g., to view or review video).

The following is a summary checklist for coaches/teams to follow during a game:

- Remain inside your team area for game official discussions.
- Only move toward the sideline after play is dead, and for signal/play calling.
- Keep non-essential personnel and spectators off the field level.
- Avoid approaching game officials during play or with electronic/video devices.
- Set a professional, sportsmanlike example for the entirety of the contest.

To minimize the risk of all involved, non-players (including substitutes, athletic trainers and coaches) must remain in their team box and out of any restricted areas, especially while the ball is live. Non-players may never be on the field while the ball is live and may only be on the field when the ball is dead in very limited situations. In the excitement of the game, it is not uncommon for substitutes and other non-players to move closer to the sideline beyond their team box area. This inevitably causes coaches to move up into restricted areas and closer to the field - often impeding game officials in their essential duties. Crowding at the sideline puts players, non-players, coaches and game officials in danger of severe injury. Game officials and coaches must be aware of this problem and take the necessary steps to prevent and correct these occurrences. Coaches, substitutes, athletic trainers and others affiliated with the team may be in their team's area, which is out-of-bounds and between the 25-yard lines (unless otherwise approved to be adjusted by state association adopted policy). Their movements and positions are limited by this designated area. The coaches' area extends at least a 2-yard depth out-of-bounds from the sideline. A maximum of three coaches – and only coaches – may be in this area when the ball is dead between plays. However, all coaches must leave this area when the ball is about to become live, such as when the snapper is approaching the ball, and no one may be in this area while the ball is live. The team box area is outside the field, beyond the restricted area and between the 25-yard lines. All coaches and non-players associated with the team may be in this area. A nonplayer may not be outside of this area unless to become a player or return as a replaced player.

When nonplayers are outside of the team box area, or anyone is in the restricted area while the ball is live, game officials will give a sideline warning to the team involved. A second offense results in a 5-yard penalty. All subsequent offenses result in 15-yard penalties for unsportsmanlike conduct fouls, which are charged to the head coach. If a game official unintentionally contacts a coach or other nonplayer in the restricted area while the ball is live, the team is assessed a 15-yard penalty for a nonplayer, illegal personal contact foul. As a nonplayer foul, the penalty is enforced from the succeeding spot. A second such offense would result in the head coach's disqualification. Unlike a foul for sideline interference (non-contact, Rule 9-8-1k or 9-8-3), no warning or 5-yard penalty is required in this situation.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE NFHS AUTHENTICATING MARK ON GAME BALLS

The NFHS Authenticating Mark ensures easy identification of inflated and non-inflated balls used in interscholastic competition for which the NFHS writes playing rules. All such balls are required to display the NFHS Authenticating Mark.

The use of conforming equipment is essential to the integrity of contests played under the NFHS rules. This mark helps to promote a level playing field by ensuring consistency in the equipment being used. The mark allows for the development of more sophisticated standards in balls and clearly communicates to administrators, coaches, and game officials that these standards are being met.

Non-compliance with these requirements will be reported to the state association for potential penalties, following the contest. Administrators and coaches play a pivotal role in making sure all inflated and non-inflated balls meet these specifications. They must instill the importance of proper equipment use through consistent reinforcement during the pre-competition certification meeting and throughout the season. Game officials must also remain vigilant and report any non-compliant balls to the state association office.

****FINAL – 5-1-26**