



2016 FOOTBALL POINTS OF EMPHASIS

RISK MINIMIZATION

Concussions

Concussions continue to be a focus of attention in football at all levels of competition. The NFHS has been at the forefront of national sports organizations in emphasizing the importance of concussion education, recognition and proper management.

Discussion of proper concussion management at all levels of play in all sports has led to the adoption of rules changes and concussion-specific policies by multiple athletic organizations, state associations and school districts. Coaches and game officials need to become familiar with the signs and symptoms of concussed athletes so that appropriate steps can be taken to safeguard the health and safety of participants.

There continues to be concern from the NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) about the cumulative effects of non-concussive blows to the head and body in practice and games. Research data is showing that there are significant impacts to the head during "non-contact" practice (such as "control"), and even in practices when players wear only helmets for protective gear. Therefore, the NFHS SMAC recommends that coaches consider holding their non-contact practices without helmets and pads for the purpose of reducing the number of blows to the head and body.

Impact Sensors

Impact sensor technology continues to advance and improve. These sensors can now be used to look at impact forces in real-time, while the players are actively participating in a sport. While these sensors are valuable as a research tool, they still cannot be used to diagnose a concussion. Players, parents, coaches and administrators need to be careful not to rely primarily on unproven technology to diagnose a concussion, or even as a tool to decide if a concussion should or should not be suspected.

Heat Illness

The NFHS SMAC continues to encourage athletic trainers, coaches, players and parents to be vigilant about heat illness. The pre-season is the time of greatest risk. An important component of heat illness awareness and preparation is to have in place a well-rehearsed Emergency Action Plan. This includes protocols for treating heat illness, including strategies for rapid cooling of at-risk athletes and guidelines for practice/game modification when indicated by Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) monitoring. Coaches need to remain open and flexible to change practice and game plans if environmental conditions are such that their players are at risk for heat illness. This is especially true during the heat-acclimation period at the start of pre-season training.

LEGAL AND ILLEGAL BLOCKS

Blocking is obstructing an opponent by contacting the opponent with any part of the blocker's body. Illegal blocking includes kick-catching interference, forward-pass interference, personal fouls and any other contact

which is specifically prohibited such as targeting, blocking below the waist or in the back, chop blocking or clipping. Blocking can involve significant personal contact between a player and an opponent. When proper blocking techniques are taught by coaches and executed by players, risks of injury are minimized. Remember, a player may attempt to take an opponent out of a play, but it is NOT legal to attempt to take an opponent out of a game.

A 2016 NFHS football rules change prohibits clipping anywhere on the field at any time, other than against a runner. Clipping is defined as a block against an opponent (other than a runner or pretended runner) when the initial contact is from behind and is at or below the waist. This action, under certain circumstances, was previously legal in the free blocking zone. Such is no longer the case. Coaches are encouraged to teach blocking techniques that do not include contact from the rear at or below the waist.

Game officials are reminded to maintain the integrity of the game and uphold their responsibilities to officiate blocking within the spirit and intent of the rules. Player safety and risk minimization are central objectives of officiating. Efforts by the NFHS rules committee, NFHS member state associations and school administrators should be supported by coaches and appropriate rules enforced by game officials to minimize risks to student-athletes.

LEGAL JERSEYS, PANTS AND PADS

In order to provide for the safety and protection of all participants, players are required to wear equipment and uniforms which are properly fitted and worn in the manner intended by the manufacturer. Jerseys are required to completely cover the shoulder pads and any auxiliary pads, such as rib pads or back pads. Pants must completely cover the knees and knee pads, and knee pads must be worn over the knee.

It is becoming more common to see the sleeves of jerseys slide up over the top of the shoulder pad, thus exposing a portion of the pad or untucked jerseys that do not cover the back pads. Additionally, many players wear pants that slide up during use, thus exposing the knee pad or the knee.

Due to the potential for injury to either the player wearing such jersey, pants or pads, or to an opponent, it is essential that players not be permitted to participate unless their jerseys and pants fully comply with the rules. A player whose jersey or pants slide up during game action must immediately make an adjustment to the garment to ensure that it covers all pads and protective equipment or, in the case of pants, fully covers the knees and knee pads. If adjustment to the jersey or pants during a dead-ball period cannot be made, the player should not be permitted to continue as a participant on the field of play. Game officials should not permit the ball to become live when they observe any player whose jersey or pants fail to comply with the rules.

UNFAIR ACTS

Rule 9-10 states that a player or non-player or person(s) not subject to the rules shall not hinder play by an unfair act that has no specific rule coverage. Teams shall not commit any act which, in the opinion of the referee, tends to make a travesty of the game.

The spirit of the game of football lives in effective blocking, fundamental tackling, tireless pursuit, skillful running, passing and kicking, and well-planned game strategy. This positive atmosphere cannot be maintained unless both the spirit and intent of the NFHS football rules are observed. If the potential values of the game experience are to be attained, that the action of the players must conform with the rules, which specifically prohibit unfair tactics and unsportsmanlike conduct. Unfair tactics detract from the positive atmosphere and the values of interscholastic athletics, and have no place in the game of football.

The prohibition of unfair tactics will encourage sportsmanship, which permeates every aspect of our game. Coaches should exemplify the highest moral character, behavior, integrity and leadership, adhering to strong ethical standards, and abiding by and teaching the rules of the game in both spirit and intent.

Student-athletes should understand the seriousness of their responsibility to teammates and opponents and the privilege of representing their school and community.

As leaders, we must recommit ourselves to the preservation of fair play, which includes eliminating illegal, unfair or dangerous acts both on the practice field and on the field of play.

The NFHS Football Rules Book specifically prohibits unfair acts. Rule 9-10 lists some examples of unfair acts, including hiding the football under a jersey or using an illegal kicking tee. Other unfair acts are prohibited by the spirit and intent of other rules, include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Uniforms which do not conform to specified standards or which have a foreign substance on them;
2. Use of disconcerting acts or words prior to the snap in an attempt to interfere with the offensive team's signals or movements; and
3. "Hide-Out" plays, including those that use a substitution or pretended substitution in order to deceive opponents at or immediately before the snap or free kick.

Of course, it is impossible to list every unfair act that could take place. Deliberately violating the rules in the hope or expectation of not being detected is deplorable and indefensible, and should be penalized.

To this end, the referee is given great discretion in penalizing unfair acts and may enforce any penalty he or she considers equitable, including the awarding of a score. If an unfair-act foul occurs and the foul already has a penalty associated with it, the referee may invoke another equitable penalty if the foul is so unfair that its normal penalty would be insufficient. For example, a substitute coming off the sideline to tackle the runner has committed illegal participation, which normally carries a 15-yard penalty. The normal penalty may be sufficient if this happens while the runner is surrounded by other defensive players and would likely be tackled anyway. However, the normal penalty would be insufficient, and enforcing it would make a travesty of the game, if the act occurred on the last play of the game while a runner was heading to the opponent's end zone well beyond the reach of any other defender. In such a case, the awarding of a score would be more equitable.

The prohibition of unfair acts is not a prohibition of special or "trick" plays. Such plays are permissible, but they must be run within the spirit and intent of the rules. Game time and circumstance are factors to consider as to the legality of any such play. Teams attempting to run trick plays must follow all NFHS football rules precisely without any leeway. Coaches are encouraged to discuss any such plays, including the time they are likely to run such plays, with the referee in the pre-game conference.

It is imperative that coaches, players and game officials make an extra effort to model the type of behavior that illustrates the educational values of interscholastic athletics in general, and football in particular. No true sportsman will violate any of the unwritten rules which exist for the good of the game. The spirit of good sportsmanship depends on conformance to a rule's intent as well as to the letter of a given rule.