



**NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF STATE HIGH SCHOOL
ASSOCIATIONS**

2026 SOCCER RULES CHANGES and POINTS OF EMPHASIS (includes rationale and comments)

RULES CHANGES

Required Uniform Rule 4-1-4c	Home team socks shall be a single dominant dark color, but not necessarily the color of the jersey for the home team. Dark is defined as any color which contrasts to white. Rationale: The two teams must wear colors that distinguish them from each other. The addition of the word dark in the home team sock clarifies that only the visiting team may wear white socks. This has been the current interpretation for years.
Tooth and Mouth Protector Rule 4-2-7d	Tooth and mouth protectors, if worn by players, should not serve any function other than to protect the teeth or mouth. Rationale: The overall purpose and function of the tooth and mouth protector is to protect the teeth, the mouth, and lips if it has a lip guard. Items that are added or included on the tooth and mouth protector that do not serve a purpose or function in the protection of the teeth or mouth should not be allowed. Also, items that are a part of the tooth and mouth protector that are a health risk to the individual wearing it should not be allowed.
Wearable Technology Rule 4-2-11a-c	Players are not permitted to wear any type of audio or video device to record, transmit or livestream, aligning with other NFHS rules books. State associations may further restrict electronic devices. Rationale: No player participating in a match is permitted to wear any type of audio or video device to record, transmit, or live stream. This language aligns with other NFHS rules books. The use of electronic communication devices with players on the field is still prohibited. State associations may further restrict electronic devices.
The Officials Rule 5-3-1f-j	Added clarification in Rule 5, for the officials' responsibilities to now include directing any player shown a yellow or red card to leave the field of play. The official must notify both coaches, the scorer, and other official(s) of the nature of the misconduct after showing a yellow or red card to a player, coach or bench personnel. Rationale: This aligns terminology by removing the term “carded” and using language found within the rules book. Explicitly defining that cautions correspond to yellow cards and ejections correspond to red cards provide clarity. Repeated or redundant language has been reorganized into new sub-articles to improve readability and consistency across the rule. Additionally, the revision clarifies that any player who is shown a card, yellow or red, must still leave the field of play and that officials are responsible for directing the player to do so.

Kickoff Rule 8-1-2	All players, except the player taking the kickoff, must be on their half of the field otherwise the kickoff shall be retaken. Rationale: This change provides clarity on the differing restarts regarding kickoff offenses. This change explicitly addresses situations when the kickoff should be retaken because players were not properly positioned on their half of the field. An indirect free kick is awarded to the opponent if the offensive player who took the kickoff touches the ball after the kick before it is played or touched by another player on either team
Biting Rule 12-2-3	Biting was incorporated into direct free kick fouls. A player shall not spit at or bite anyone listed on a roster or a game official, otherwise a direct free kick foul will be awarded. Rationale: Incorporates biting into direct free kick fouls. The old rule only discussed spitting at a player the new rule incorporates spitting or biting essentially anyone.
Fouls and Misconduct Rule 12-1-2c	A player shall not charge into, or challenge, an opposing goalkeeper who is controlling the ball with their hands. Penalty: Direct Free Kick Outside the penalty area, the goalkeeper has no more privileges than any other player. An attacker trying to head the ball out of the opposing goalkeeper's hand commits a direct free kick foul. Rationale: Overall, this change aligns the rule with consistent officiating practice, removes redundancies and improves clarity without materially altering when a charge is or is not permitted. The change consolidates language referring to the goalkeeper controlling the ball with their hands, where the simplified language refers to the full, shared definition referenced in a later section. This change emphasizes the core safety concept that remains unchanged: the goalkeeper in possession of the ball with their hands cannot be charged or challenged.
Goalkeeper Interference Rule 12-3-2	Goalkeeper Interference: A player shall not prevent the opposing goalkeeper from releasing the ball from their hands nor kick, or attempt to kick, the ball when the goalkeeper is in the process of releasing it. Penalty: Indirect Free Kick The attacker jumping at the goalkeeper preventing them from releasing the ball without making contact commits an indirect free kick (IDK). Rationale: We reworded this rule to make it clearer to coaches and officials to distinguish the difference between charging a goalkeeper in possession of the ball vs. interfering with the goalkeeper releasing the ball.

Rule 12-3-2a	The goalkeeper is considered to be in control of the ball with the hand(s)/arm(s) when: 1. The ball is between the hands or between the hand and any surface (e.g., ground, own body, goal post) or by touching the ball with any part of the hands or arms; 2. Holding the ball in an outstretched open hand; 3. Bouncing the ball on the ground or throwing the ball in the air, including bouncing or throwing the ball as part of kicking or punting the ball. 12-3-2b: When the goalkeepers puts the ball on the ground, they relinquish their privileges as goalkeepers. Rationale: This comprehensive language was combined from separate articles in rule 12 into one article. It also clearly defines what it means for a goalkeeper to posses the ball.
Goalkeeper Rules 12-3-1, 12-3-3a, and 17-1-1,3	After controlling the ball with their hands/arm, the goalkeepers will now have 8 seconds instead of 6 seconds to release the ball. The referee determines when the 8 second count begins. Penalty: A corner kick will be awarded if the goalkeeper holds the ball longer than 8 seconds, replacing the previous indirect free kick restart. Rationale: Reorganizes goalkeeper restrictions, extends goalkeeper possession limit from six to eight seconds and changes the penalty from indirect free kick at the point of infraction to a corner kick. The referee may start the 8 second count once the goalkeeper clearly has gained uncontested possession.
Goalkeeper Rules 12-3-3a(2)	The referee shall signal the remaining five seconds (using Official NFHS Soccer Signals, Rule 5-3-1b) by raising an arm above the head and indicating the number of seconds left with their fingers. Violations of this rule are still enforced even if the referee fails to provide a visual signal. Rationale: Adds signal to the NFHS soccer Rule Signal Chart to help communicate the goalkeepers time remaining in the new 8 second restriction.
Indirect Free Kicks Rule 12-3-5	Clarifying language was added to considerations for dangerous play. Dangerous play now explicitly includes actions preventing a nearby opponent from playing the ball for fear of injury. This includes playing in such a manner which could cause injury to self or another player, opponent or teammate, <u>or which prevents a nearby opponent from playing the ball for fear of injury.</u> Rationale: Adds clarifying language to the considerations for dangerous play that include actions that prevent a nearby opponent from playing the ball for fear of injury.

Verbal Offenses Rules 12-3-6, 12-3-7	Rules 12-3-6 was added to include verbal offenses as IDFK. This gives officials more flexibility when disciplining verbal offenses: they are now considered fouls at a minimum and may rise to the level of misconduct depending on the circumstances. Rule 12-3-7 Address if the game is stopped for misconduct and no other restart takes precedence; then it will restart with IDFK. Rationale: Including verbal offenses as an indirect free kick foul, this also gives more flexibility for officials when disciplining verbal offenses: they are now considered fouls at a minimum and may rise to the level of misconduct depending on the circumstances. New Article 7 then addresses any other reason for which play is stopped for misconduct; play is restarted with an indirect free kick. Verbal offense situations Situation: On a penalty kick, the defending team B2 shouts loudly at the moment that A10 is about to kick the ball. This is unfair interference and distracts the kicker. The referee retakes the penalty kick. RULING: Correct Procedure. Situation: A2 is about to receive the ball, an B3 who is close and behind the defender, shouts to mislead the opponent. A2 hesitates and fails to control the ball turning it over to B3. The referee stops play and awards an indirect free kick (INDFK) and cautions B3 for unsporting behavior. RULING: Correct procedure. The referee may award an IDFK if they feel the verbal offense warrants the stoppage.
DOGSO Ejections Rule 12-6-1b(1-4)	Revisions clarify and simplify language surrounding Denying an Obvious Goal-Scoring Opportunity (DOGSO) ejections. Redundant wording was removed and references to intending to deny a goal or goal-scoring opportunity (DOGSO) were eliminated. Rationale: This change clarifies and simplifies the language surrounding DOGSO ejections by removing redundant wording, references to intending to deny a goal or a goal-scoring opportunity were eliminated. Aligns with previous rule wording within Rule 12. The updated structure provides four clear situations for denying a goal or obvious opportunity resulting in an ejection. The updated structure provides clear situations for which denying a goal or obvious goal-scoring opportunity is penalized with an ejection.
Free Kick Restarts Rules 13-1 thru 13-2	Revisions clarify procedures for restarts on free kicks by breaking the rule into distinct categories. The update outlines when and where free kicks are awarded, how they are to be taken, and the correct restart locations. It also incorporates restart procedures for scenarios involving outside agents, offenses off the field, thrown objects, individuals entering the field illegally, players leaving the field without permission, and offenses outside the field of play. Rationale: The revision of Rule 13 clarifies the procedures for restarts on free kicks by breaking the rule into distinct categories, outlining when and where free kicks are awarded, and detailing how they should be taken. It also specifies the correct restart locations and provides guidance for officials on managing these situations. Additionally, the update incorporates restart procedures for scenarios involving outside agents, offenses occurring off the field, thrown objects, individuals entering the field illegally, players leaving the field without permission, and offenses that occur outside the field of play.

Rule 13-2 When and Where awarded	1. Free Kicks are the restarts for fouls 2. Free Kicks are taken from where the offense occurred with exceptions 3. Free Kicks taken inside the goal area 4. Outside interference, entering and re-entering the field 5. Players leaving the field 6. Offenses outside the field of play Exceptions: ART 2. a. Direct free kicks awarded to the attacking team for an offense committed within the offending team's own penalty area result in a penalty kick. b. If a direct free kick offense begins outside the offender's penalty area and continues inside the penalty area, a penalty kick is awarded. c. For offenses involving striking or the throwing of an object, the free kick is awarded at the position where contact occurred or would have occurred. If this location is off the field of play, then the free kick is awarded as in 13-2-6. d. Indirect free kicks awarded for an offside offense are taken from where the offender became involved in active play (i.e., the location on the field where the offender interfered with play, interfered with an opponent, or gained an advantage). ART 4. a. If they interfere with play or a game official, then a direct free kick or penalty kick is awarded to the opposing team at the location on the field where the interference occurred. b. If they touch the ball while it is still in play, but when the ball is clearly leaving the field without the offender creating an unfair impact, then an indirect free kick is awarded to the opposing team at the location where the offender touched the ball, and there is no disciplinary sanction. c. If there is no interference and they commit no other offense, but play is stopped for their entry/re-entry, then an indirect free kick is awarded to the opposing team at the location on the field where the ball was positioned when play was stopped.
Penalty Kick Rule 14-1-2 - Encroachment	Encroachment is penalized only if the offense has a clear impact on the penalty kick. If players from either team enter the penalty area or arc early but have no effect on the kicker, goalkeeper, or the immediate play, officials should allow the result of the kick to stand without penalty. Rationale: The rewrite ensures that encroachment is now only penalized if the offense has a clear impact on the penalty kick. Goalkeepers will now receive a warning for a first offense rather than an immediate caution, acknowledging that such infractions often stem from mis-anticipation. Regarding the kicker, the revisions continue to allow for deceptive movements and stutter-stepping during the run-up; however, the change strictly prohibits feinting once the approach to the ball is completed. Finally, in rare instances where both the kicker and goalkeeper offend simultaneously, the kicker is penalized, as their illegal feinting is typically the catalyst for the goalkeeper's infraction. The penalty chart is also updated and reformatted for clarity.
Rule 14-1-2	Encroaching attacker A5 impacts the play. Penalty: The defending team is awarded an indirect free kick from where A5 kicked the ball.

Penalty Kick Rule 14-1-3 – Goalkeeper Encroachment	Goalkeepers will now receive a warning for a first offense rather than an immediate caution. Cautions are reserved for subsequent infractions. Rationale: This change acknowledges that when a goalkeeper encroaches these infractions often stem from mis-anticipation and doesn't over penalize the goalkeeper.																																																		
Penalty Kick Rule 14 – Kicker Feinting	Deceptive movements and stutter-stepping by the kicker during the run-up continue to be allowed. However, feinting (or pretending to kick the ball) once the approach to the ball is completed is strictly prohibited. This is an act of unsporting conduct that shall be cautioned and is enforced on the first and every subsequent occurrence.																																																		
Penalty Kick Situations 14-1-2, 14-1-3, 14-1-4	PENALTY KICK SITUATIONS (14-1-2, 14-1-3, and 14-1-4) <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="2" rowspan="2">Offense</th><th colspan="2">Outcome of the Penalty Kick</th></tr> <tr> <th>Goal</th><th>No Goal</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Defender encroaches</td><td>Impact</td><td>Goal</td><td>Retake</td></tr> <tr> <td>No impact</td><td>Goal</td><td>No retake</td></tr> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Attacker encroaches</td><td>Impact</td><td>Retake</td><td>Indirect free kick</td></tr> <tr> <td>No impact</td><td>Goal</td><td>No retake</td></tr> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Both teams encroach</td><td>Impact</td><td>Retake</td><td>Retake</td></tr> <tr> <td>No impact</td><td>Goal</td><td>No retake</td></tr> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Goalkeeper offends</td><td>Impact</td><td>Goal</td><td>Retake (GK is warned or cautioned)</td></tr> <tr> <td>No impact</td><td>Goal</td><td>If saved: retake (GK is warned or cautioned) If not saved: no retake</td></tr> <tr> <td rowspan="3">Kicker offends</td><td>Wrong kicker</td><td colspan="2">Indirect free kick (wrong kicker is cautioned)</td></tr> <tr> <td>Illegal feinting</td><td colspan="2">Indirect free kick (kicker is cautioned)</td></tr> <tr> <td>Ball kicked backwards</td><td colspan="2">Indirect free kick</td></tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">Goalkeeper and kicker offend at the same time</td><td colspan="2">Indirect free kick (kicker is cautioned)</td></tr> </tbody> </table>			Offense		Outcome of the Penalty Kick		Goal	No Goal	Defender encroaches	Impact	Goal	Retake	No impact	Goal	No retake	Attacker encroaches	Impact	Retake	Indirect free kick	No impact	Goal	No retake	Both teams encroach	Impact	Retake	Retake	No impact	Goal	No retake	Goalkeeper offends	Impact	Goal	Retake (GK is warned or cautioned)	No impact	Goal	If saved: retake (GK is warned or cautioned) If not saved: no retake	Kicker offends	Wrong kicker	Indirect free kick (wrong kicker is cautioned)		Illegal feinting	Indirect free kick (kicker is cautioned)		Ball kicked backwards	Indirect free kick		Goalkeeper and kicker offend at the same time		Indirect free kick (kicker is cautioned)	
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EDITORIAL CHANGES

Player Equipment Rule 4-1-2	All jerseys, including the goalkeeper's jersey, shall be numbered with a different, unique Arabic number. If a visible number is worn on the uniform bottom, it shall be the same number as on the uniform top. Rationale: Clarifies different means unique and all rules regarding numbers into the same article.
Player Equipment Rule 4-3-3	Both teams may wear shorts of a similar color. Rationale: The addition of the language makes it clear that both teams may wear the same color of shorts provided the jerseys and socks are different colors. The away team is not required to wear white shorts.

POINTS OF EMPHASIS

Properly Marked Fields	- Administrators, coaches, and officials must prioritize proper marking of team areas and the maintenance of the 10-foot buffer around the field boundary lines. - Team areas extend 10 yards from each side of the halfway line for a total length of 20 yards, set back 10 feet from the touchline. - Team areas must be clearly designated and marked by a solid line. When markings are missing, officials should work with administrators or coaches to place cones as temporary boundaries. - Any violations of Rule 1-5-3 must be reported to the state association.
NFHS Authenticating Mark on Game Balls	- The NFHS Authenticating Mark ensures easy identification of balls used in interscholastic competitions. All such balls are required to display the NFHS Authenticating Mark. - This mark helps promote a level playing field by ensuring consistency in equipment and clearly communicates that standards are being met. - Administrators and coaches play a pivotal role in making sure all balls meet specifications through consistent reinforcement during pre-competition meetings. - Game officials must remain vigilant and report any non-compliant balls to the state association office.
Shared Professionalism and Bench Accountability	- High school soccer serves as an extension of the classroom, requiring both officials and coaches to uphold the highest standards of composure and integrity. - Professional communication should remain non-threatening and conversational. Raising one's voice, displaying frustrations or acting in a provocative manner only escalates conflict. - When a caution or ejection is issued, officials advise the head coach using appropriate rulebook language. Both parties share responsibility for ensuring communication remains professional. - Any dissent or inappropriate conduct should be addressed firmly and professionally. Coaches are accountable for their behavior and must model emotional control and sportsmanship.
Managing Goal Celebrations	- Celebrating after scoring a goal is an integral part of soccer. Reacting with joy is permissible provided it is not excessive and not accompanied by taunting. - Players are allowed to celebrate and may leave the field momentarily, provided they make a prompt return to the playing field. Rehearsed or choreographed celebrations should be discouraged. - The line between allowable celebration and misconduct is crossed when a player or team prevents a timely restart by delaying excessively or by taunting opponents or fans. - Examples of misconduct include jumping over barriers, climbing fences, or removing one's jersey. Any act that prohibits a timely restart is unsporting conduct and requires a caution.
Penalty Kick Offenses and the Concept of Impact	- Encroachment during a penalty kick is only penalized if the offense has a clear impact on the play. - Encroachment by the defending team is never penalized if the goal is scored. If the kick is missed or saved and the defense encroached with impact, the kick is retaken. - Goalkeepers who encroach and impact the kicker shall receive a warning for the first offense, with cautions reserved for subsequent infractions. - While kickers are permitted stutter-steps during the run-up, feinting once the approach is complete is unsporting conduct that shall be cautioned on every occurrence.