



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS

2026 FOOTBALL RULES CHANGES, RULES REMINDERS and POINTS OF EMPHASIS (includes rationale and comments)

NFHS FOOTBALL RULES

Each state high school association adopting these NFHS football rules is the sole and exclusive source of binding rules interpretations for contests involving its member schools. Any person having questions about the interpretation of NFHS football rules should contact the football rules interpreter designated by the respective state high school association.

The NFHS is the sole and exclusive source of model interpretations of NFHS football rules. State rules interpreters may contact the NFHS for model football rules interpretations. No other model football rules interpretations should be considered.

RULES CHANGES

PLAYER EQUIPMENT Play Cards Rule 1-5-3c(9)	RULE 1 – SECTION 5 PLAYER EQUIPMENT ART. 3 . . . Illegal equipment. No player shall participate while wearing illegal equipment. This applies to any equipment, which in the opinion of the umpire is dangerous, confusing or inappropriate. Illegal equipment shall always include but is not limited to: ... c. The following Other Illegal Equipment: ... 9. Play cards not worn on the wrist, arm <u>or belt</u> . <u>Comment:</u> The committee has approved the wearing of play cards on both the forearm/wrist and belt areas of the body.
ILLEGAL PERSONAL CONTACT HEAD SLAP RULES 9-4-7	RULE 9 – SECTION 4 ILLEGAL PERSONAL CONTACT ART. 7 . . . <u>No player may use the hand(s) to slap the opponent's head.</u> <u>Comment on Change:</u> The committee approved new rules language that no player may use the hand(s) to slap the opponent's head. <u>Case Book Situation:</u> 9.4.7 SITUATION C

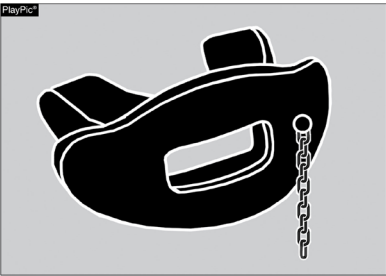
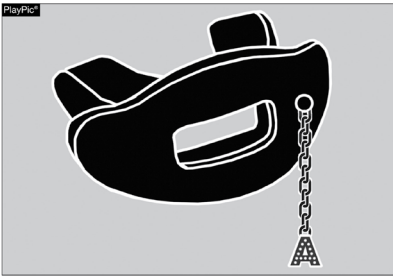
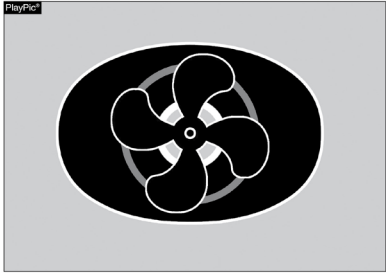
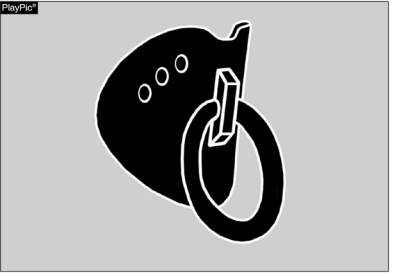
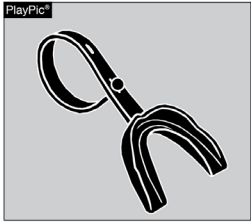
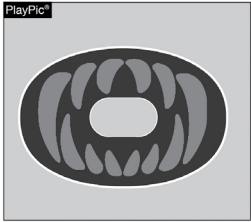
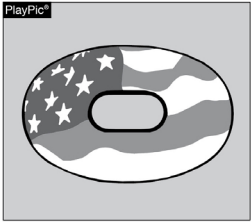
EDITORIAL CHANGES

GAME ENDING PROCEDURE RULE 1-1-8	RULE 1 – SECTION 1 THE GAME ART. 8 . . . The game officials' authority extends through the referee's declaration of the end of the fourth period or overtime. <u>The jurisdiction of the game officials is terminated, and the final score has been approved when all game officials leave the visual confines of the playing area.</u> The game officials retain clerical authority over the game through the completion of any reports, including those imposing disqualifications, that are responsive to actions occurring while the game officials had jurisdiction. State Associations may intercede in the event of unusual incidents that occur before, during or after the game officials' jurisdiction has ended or in the event that a game is terminated prior to the conclusion of regulation play.
--	---

	<u>Comment on Change:</u> Further clarifies end of game procedures for game officials. <u>Case Book Situation:</u> 1.1.8 SITUATION C
PLAYER DESIGNATIONS Disqualified Player RULE 2-32-6	RULE 2 – SECTION 32 PLAYER DESIGNATIONS ART. 6 . . . A disqualified player is a player barred from further participation in a game. <u>A disqualified player can be permitted to remain in the team box area.</u> <u>Comment on Change:</u> Clarifies that a disqualified player can remain in the team box if the state association allows an ejected player to remain at the venue.
ILLEGAL PERSONAL CONTACT/DEFENSELESS PLAYER RULES 9-4-3p	RULE 9 – SECTION 4 ILLEGAL PERSONAL CONTACT ART. 3 . . . No player or nonplayer shall: ... p. Initiate forceful contact against a defenseless receiver as in 2-32-16b, 2-32-16c and <u>2-32-16e</u> that is not: 1. Incidental contact as a result of making a play on the ball; 2. Initiated with open hands; or 3. An attempt to tackle by wrapping arm(s) around the receiver. <u>Comment on Change:</u> Clarifies type of contact against a kick receiver that is illegal.
BASIC SPOT RULE 10-4-4a	RULE 10 – SECTION 4 BASIC SPOTS ART. 4 . . . The basic spot is the spot of the foul for: a. Illegal batting or illegal kicking <u>by A that occurs behind the basic spot;</u> ... <u>Comment on Change:</u> Further clarifies the basic spot for illegal batting or kicking by A.
NEW DELAY OF GAME SIGNAL Signal #21	NFHS OFFICIAL FOOTBALL SIGNALS – Signal #21 – Delay of Game <u>Comment on Change:</u> The NFHS Football Game Officials Manual Committee recommended changing Signal #21 – Delay of Game – to folded crossed arms in front of the body for 2026. The NFHS Football Rules Editorial Committee approved this change.
1-3-5b	Changed “Head Linesman” to “Head Line Judge.
1-5-3a(2)	Deleted the reference to “opponent.”
2-15-1	Further clarified to make definition more consistent with forward fumble rule that was approved in 2025.
3-5-7g	Replaced “heat and humidity” with “circumstances and conditions” better covers a variety of situations that may create a health risk to players.
4-1-3	Deleted “if elected” from the rule as it was not needed.
5-3-1	Added “ball being” before ready-for-play for clarification.
5-3-2	Changed “Head Linesman” to “Head Line Judge.
8-2-2, 8-2-3, 8-2-4, 8-2-5	Changed “subsequent kickoff” to “succeeding spot” for clarification.

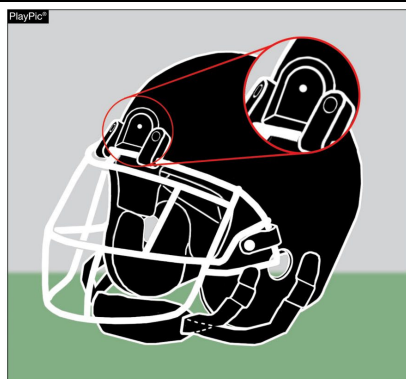
9-8 PENALTY	Added ‘basic spot’ to the PENALTY section to give better clarity that unsportsmanlike and nonplayer unsportsmanlike fouls are enforced from the basic spot.
10-4-2	Revised the rules references in the rule.
10-4-2b	Deleted “behind the line of scrimmage” from the rule to eliminate redundancy.
10-5-3	Deleted “and enforcement is from behind its goal line” to eliminate conflicts with recent rules changes to Rule 10-4.
FOOTBALL FUNDAMENTAL – Penalty Measurement (4)	Removed all of the rules references and relaced with “otherwise specified by rule.”
RESOLVING TIED GAMES – (3-1)	Changed “Head Linesman” to “Head Line Judge.
6-Player Rules Differences – Rule 7	Further clarified when a passer becomes eligible if the pass was touched by B.

RULES REMINDERS

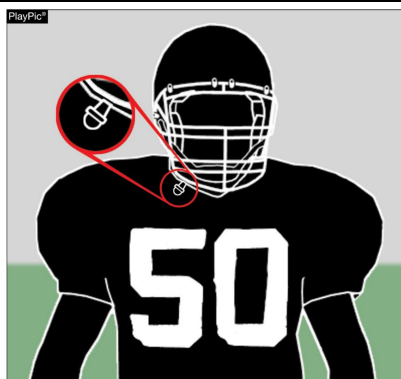
Player Equipment Tooth & Mouth Protector Rules 1-5- 1d(5)a-4,5	Effective 2026: Tooth and mouth protectors may not include any attachment(s) that do not serve a purpose and function in protecting the teeth or mouth.  ILLEGAL  ILLEGAL  ILLEGAL  ILLEGAL These tooth and mouth protectors neither include any attachment(s) that does not serve a purpose and function in protecting the teeth or mouth, nor anything that is a health or risk issue posing a danger and are not impacted by this rule change.  LEGAL  LEGAL  LEGAL  LEGAL
--	---

Arm Sleeves Rule 1-5-2d, And 1-5-3c(6)	Effective 2027: Arm sleeves, whether attached to a shirt or unattached, manufactured to enhance contact with the football or opponent must meet the SFIA Specification at the time of manufacture.   Effective 2027: Arm sleeves must have a permanent, exact replica of the SFIA arm sleeve seal (meets SFIA Specification), that must be visible and appear legibly on the exterior of the arm sleeve.
ELECTRONIC SIGNS Rule 1-5-3c(2)	Fixed electronic signs (non-audio) with play signals are allowed to communicate from the sideline. 
ILLEGAL EQUIPMENT	Any video (camera) device or audio (microphone) worn by a player during the game is illegal.

Rule 1-5-3c(3)
NEW



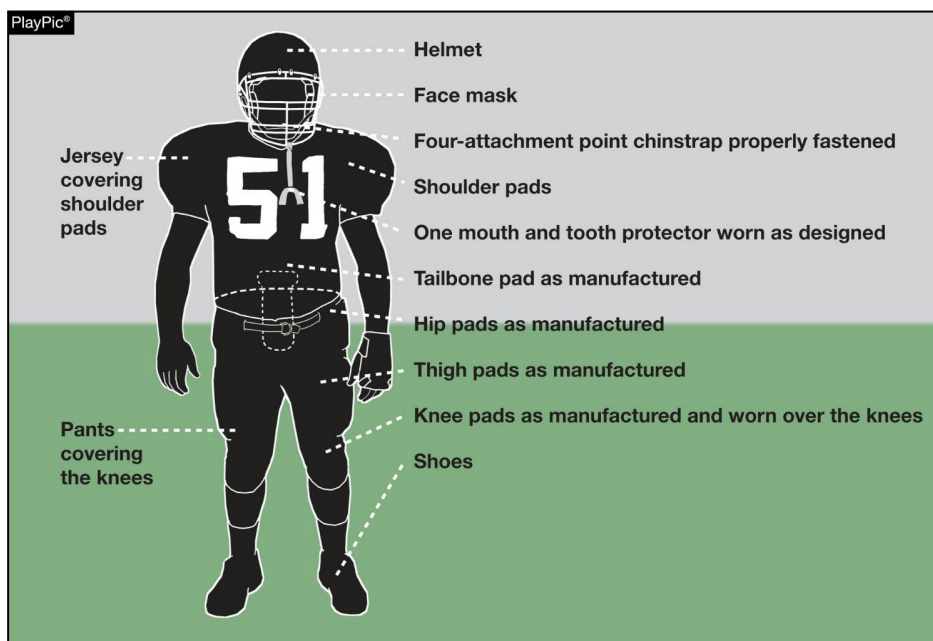
ILLEGAL



ILLEGAL

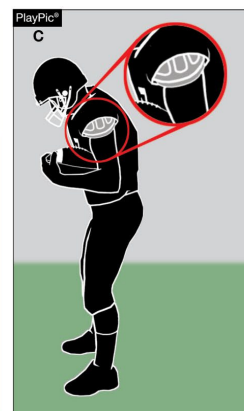
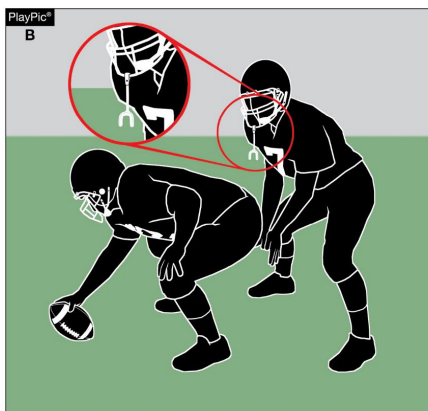
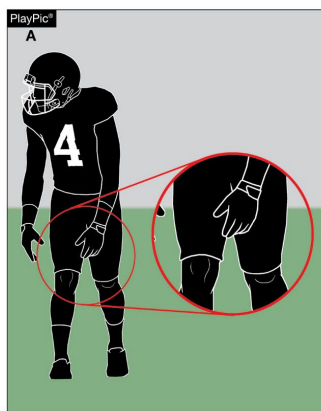
ILLEGAL and IMPROPERLY WORN PLAYER EQUIPMENT

To support the safety of all participants, players must wear equipment and uniforms that are properly fitted and worn as intended by the manufacturer. Before starting each game, the head coach must verify that all players are properly and legally equipped. Allowing players to use illegal equipment or to wear required equipment improperly could subject the coach to a penalty.



ILLEGAL and IMPROPERLY WORN PLAYER EQUIPMENT

Improperly worn equipment pertains to all equipment that is otherwise legal but not worn as intended. Examples include pants not covering the knees, tooth and mouth protectors not being worn as play starts and shoulder pads not properly covered by the jersey.



ILLEGAL and IMPROPERLY WORN PLAYER EQUIPMENT	Illegal (prohibited) equipment includes jewelry (A), tinted visors (B), non-compliant eye shade (C), bands worn around the upper arm, neck or legs (D), and uniform adornments like towels that do not conform to rules (E).
POP-UP KICK Rules 2-24-10, 6-1-11, 6-1Penalty	A pop-up kick is a free kick in which the kicker drives the ball immediately to the ground, the ball strikes the ground once and goes into the air in the manner of a ball kicked directly off the tee. Such kicks are penalized as a dead-ball foul.

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. Game officials must consistently penalize both flagrant and unsportsmanlike fouls to maintain control of the game. 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.

Flagrant fouls are the most severe type of personal foul in high school football.

A foul so severe or extreme that it places an opponent in danger of serious injury, and/or involves violations that are extremely or persistently vulgar or abusive conduct.

These actions involve intentional, reckless or excessively violent behavior that shows a clear disregard for the safety of others. Examples include fighting, maliciously targeting the head or neck area, striking an opponent, or delivering a violent illegal blindside block or late hit.

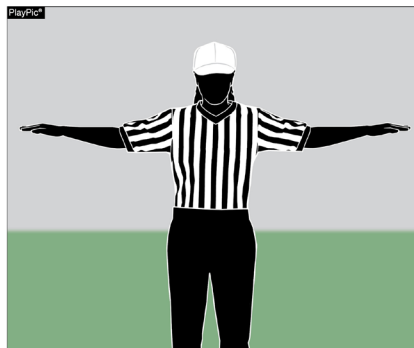
Disqualification if any foul is judged by the game official to be flagrant.



PERSONAL FOUL

Unsportsmanlike fouls are non-contact fouls that violate standards of fair play, respect and sportsmanship.

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 CONDUCT
NONCONTACT FOUL

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

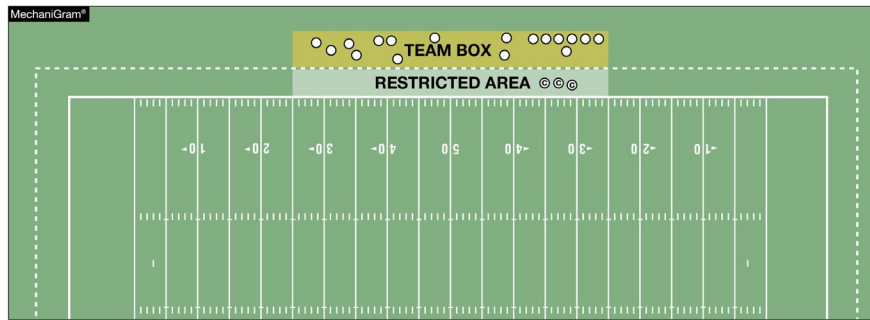
Illegally helping the runner to assist forward progress presents a risk of injury to the runner and others. The additional momentum to a particular offensive player, as opposed to the pile, swings the competitive balance toward the offense in a manner not intended by the rules.



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 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. Although direct contact with the runner is illegal under NFHS rules, these types of 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. 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. 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. To minimize the risk of all involved, non-players must remain in their team box and out of any restricted areas, especially while the ball is live. The coaches’ area is a

minimum of a 2-yard belt between the front of the team box and the sideline, and becomes the restricted area when the ball is live. A maximum of three coaches – and only coaches – may be in this area when the ball is dead between plays.



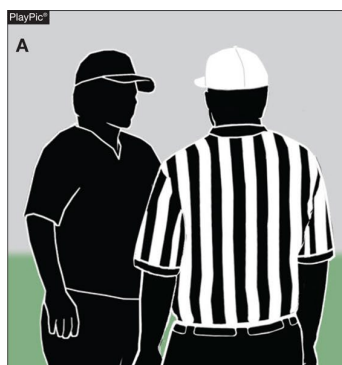
Sideline management has become a recurring “point of emphasis” because it improves game safety by keeping game officials, players, coaching staff and other team personnel clear of the active game play areas. It promotes good sportsmanship and professionalism across all levels of play and also prevents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

Game officials are instructed to strictly enforce NFHS Football Rules when coaches or team personnel enter the field of play to dispute rulings or address game officials outside the coaching area.



- 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.

Sideline management and control 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 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.