

# 2025-26 SOCCER PRESEASON GUIDE



PLAY.  
PERFORM  
COMPETE.  
TOGETHER.

## Misconduct Management

### NFHS Rule Changes Target Coach, Player Misconduct

**B**eginning next school year, soccer head coaches may be warned, cautioned or ejected for misconduct committed by bench personnel in the team area. This new rule reinforces the concept of holding the head coach more accountable for the behavior of their team area. The increased responsibility of head coaches for team conduct highlights the 2025-26 high school soccer rule changes.

That was one of six rule changes approved by the NFHS Soccer Rules Committee at its annual meeting, Feb. 10-12 in Indianapolis, and subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

The changes are covered in relative order of significance.

#### Misconduct 12-4-4

Rule 12-4-4 was amended to support positive bench decorum and reinforce the head coach's responsibility for the conduct of their team and bench personnel within the team area. The new language gives officials another tool to manage misconduct from the team bench area. Now a head coach may be warned, cautioned or ejected in addition to any cautions or ejections issued to the sanctioned offender. A head coach who allows their assistants to yell at a referee runs the risk of being cautioned for that choice. When individuals in the team area use their voice in an unsporting way, the head coach can be held responsible.

"The 2025-26 rules changes emphasize accountability and sportsmanship, reinforcing the head coach's responsibility for team conduct," said Gibby Reynolds, chair of the Soccer Rules Committee and an administrator with the Oregon School Activities Association. "Head coaches



Victor Cisneros, Riverside, Calif., interacts with a player wearing an arm band, indicating the player is a team captain. A new NFHS rule for the 2025-26 season stipulates that no coach, player, substitute or other team personnel, other than the team captain, can approach or speak to an official during the interval between periods, unless beckoned by an official.

have a high degree of responsibility for their team areas and bench behavior and are to be held accountable now that officials are allowed to warn, caution or eject head coaches for misconduct committed by bench personnel. This change promotes a culture of respect and

positive behavior on the sidelines. These updates, along with the other approved changes, continue our commitment to improving the high school soccer experience for players, coaches and officials."

**Play 1:** In a highly contested game,



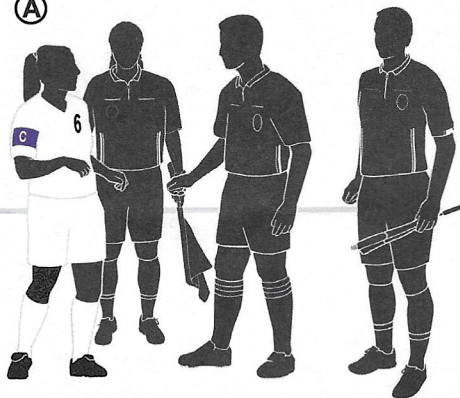
the assistant coach yells an obscenity at the referee. **Ruling 1:** The assistant coach is ejected for using offensive or abusive language. The head coach can be warned or cautioned at the same time depending what has been communicated to the bench to this point in the game.

### Intervals Between Periods 7-2-4

The committee also addressed behavior toward officials, aiming to reduce unnecessary confrontations. Rule 7-2-4 was added and stipulates that no coach, player, substitute or other team personnel other than the team captain can approach or speak to officials during the interval between periods, unless beckoned by the official. This action will now result in a yellow card to the offending individual.

PlayPic<sup>®</sup>

A



Often during intervals between periods, the coach, players or other bench personnel approach the referee team to discuss decisions made during the game or to complain about how the game is being managed. The interval is for coaches to discuss performance with the players, strategy changes and for the referee team to discuss any items they deem appropriate. In addition to rule 7-2-4, a new 12-5-1b indicates that “approaching an official during an interval period without permission” is to be cautioned.

**Play 2:** At halftime, the officials meet near the scorer’s table to discuss the first half of play. The team captain approaches the officials and begins to dissent about decisions made during the first half, as shown in PlayPic A. **Ruling 2:** The officials have tools they can utilize here. The captain may be warned if they haven’t had issues earlier in the game or may be cautioned for dissent. Although

the captain may approach the officials, the captain cannot dissent or act in an improper manner.

**Play 3:** The state association has adopted a water break at the 20-minute mark each half during warmer-weather games. The head coach approaches the officiating crew during this time to complain about a call that happened earlier. **Ruling 3:** The officials can once again utilize tools in their toolbox for managing this situation. Depending on the level of dissent and if the head coach is respectful or not, the officials may warn or caution the head coach.

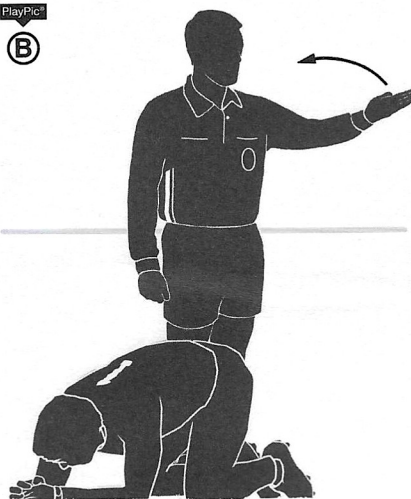
### Substitutions 3-3-2

A change to rule 3-3-2 clarifies that if an official beckons a coach or appropriate health-care provider for an injured player — including the goalkeeper, as shown in PlayPic B — that player must leave the field regardless of the reason the clock is stopped.

Another change to rule 3-3-2 allows teams to substitute players when a game is temporarily suspended. Games are often paused for water breaks in hot weather. Teams will now be permitted to make substitutions during these stoppages.

PlayPic<sup>®</sup>

B



**Play 4:** A3 is on the attack and goalkeeper B1 moves out from the goal to prevent A3 from scoring. A3 and B1 make contact and the ball continues forward into the goal. The referee signals to stop the clock and points to the center spot for a goal. B1 remains on the ground and the referee beckons the trainer. The coach does not want to substitute for the

goalkeeper because the clock was stopped for the goal. **Ruling 4:** The substitution must be made since the athletic trainer was beckoned onto the field by the referee.

### Uniforms 4-1-2

Rule 4-1-2 was edited to clarify that the number required on the front of the uniform may be on the jersey and/or the shorts.

**Play 5:** Team B has 6-inch numbers on the back of their jerseys and a 4-inch number on the front of the shorts. There is no number on the front of the jersey.

**Ruling 5:** Legal since the number can be on the front of the jersey or the shorts.

### Rule 18 Definitions

Finally, Rule 18, which listed definitions, has been eliminated from the NFHS Soccer Rules Book. All relevant definitions were relocated to their corresponding rules, and redundant or outdated terms were removed. In addition, the index was expanded to better serve as a reference tool.

“Over the past few years, the rules committee has been committed to streamlining the rules book for greater clarity and ease of use,” Cochran said. “By integrating Rule 18’s terms and definitions directly into their corresponding rule sections, we continue this effort — eliminating redundancy, resolving potential conflicts and ensuring consistency. The result is a more intuitive and efficient resource for all users.”

### Editorial Change: Substitutions 3-3-7

An editorial change removes duplicate descriptions of when a substitute who comes in during a penalty kick situation is not allowed to take the penalty kick.

### Editorial Change: Required Uniform 4-1-1c

Restrictions on what may appear on a player’s uniform have been loosened. A school’s nickname and/or mascot are now permitted on a uniform, in addition to the school’s name, logo and/or player’s name.

### Editorial Change: Officials 5-1-2

No changes were made to the jurisdiction of officials, but Article 1 was broken into bite-size pieces to be more user friendly. ■



# 2025-26 NFHS Points of Emphasis

Each year the NFHS Soccer Rules Committee discusses items it feels are extremely important for the sport. These items include problems from the previous season and ideas from committee members based on feedback from previous seasons. This year, the committee has determined four items that are incorporated into the rulebook as Points of Emphasis.

## Education-Based High School Athletics

High school athletics play a vital role in the overall growth of student-athletes, providing opportunities to develop physically, mentally and emotionally. Soccer serves as a platform for building essential life skills such as teamwork, discipline, leadership and resilience. Coaching priorities focus on fundamental skills, strategic gameplay and decision-making while instilling respect for opponents, officials and teammates. As the game evolves, a strong understanding and application of the rules are essential to maintaining fair and safe competition, making rule education a key responsibility for players, coaches and officials.

A well-rounded high school soccer program should emphasize both athletic and academic development, reinforcing the importance of discipline, time management and perseverance. Education-based athletics prepare students not only for success in sports but also for their future endeavors by teaching valuable life lessons through competition. Schools, coaches and administrators must work together to ensure that high school soccer fosters growth, responsibility and leadership, creating a positive experience that supports student success both on and off the field.

## Courage, Character and Consistency

Courage, character, and consistency are essential qualities for any soccer official. These qualities encourage the game to be managed fairly, effectively and with integrity.

- **Courage.** Officials must have the courage to make difficult decisions, calling fouls equally for both teams without fear of backlash from players,

coaches or spectators. This courage extends to maintaining authority on the field, recognizing and firmly addressing any attempts to challenge their control or interfere with the game.

- **Character** is reflected in professionalism and the official's personality they incorporate into their management philosophy, fostering cooperation and mutual support within the officiating team. By maintaining composure and a focused attitude, officials uphold the integrity of the game, ensuring their decisions are based on the rules within the spirit of the game, rather than external pressures or emotions.

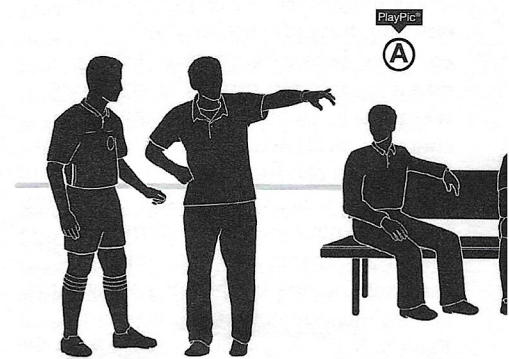
- **Consistency** ties the aforementioned attributes together, ensuring officials apply the rules uniformly and fairly throughout the game. Players and coaches expect predictability from officials in decision-making, which reinforces trust in the official's authority. An official who applies the rules consistently, while managing interactions with confidence and conviction, fosters a controlled and respectful environment.

An official who successfully combines these attributes bolsters acceptance when managing dissent and conflicts, while emphasizing calmness, direct communication and resolution without unnecessary escalation. Ultimately, courage, character and consistency define an official's ability to manage the game effectively, uphold fairness and maintain order, ensuring a positive experience for all participants.

## Team Areas and Bench Decorum

Effective communication is essential for officials in maintaining control over the match, particularly when dealing with bench decorum and sportsmanship. An official's role is to keep the game safe, fair and fun, which requires adapting to the level of play

and responding to game situations as they develop. High school soccer is an extension of the classroom, meaning officials must uphold the highest standards of professionalism, composure, and integrity. By setting a respectful tone, referees can prevent escalation and unnecessary conflict. Recognizing and addressing dissent early is crucial — while emotional reactions can be ignored, public, provocative or persistent complaints must be dealt with decisively.



Coaches and bench personnel set the tone for their teams, as shown in PlayPic A, and poor behavior can spread if not managed properly. **In education-based athletics, adult leaders must be champions of character.** Bench decorum must be actively monitored, as unchecked misconduct from the team area can quickly influence players and spectators. The head coach has an obligation to manage their team's behavior. A firm but fair approach ensures that the game remains under control while demonstrating respect for all participants. Officials have tools to warn coaches and must take action to sanction misconduct when it occurs. Ultimately, head coaches are responsible for their team area, including assistant coaches and substitutes, and must be held accountable for any misconduct occurring within it.

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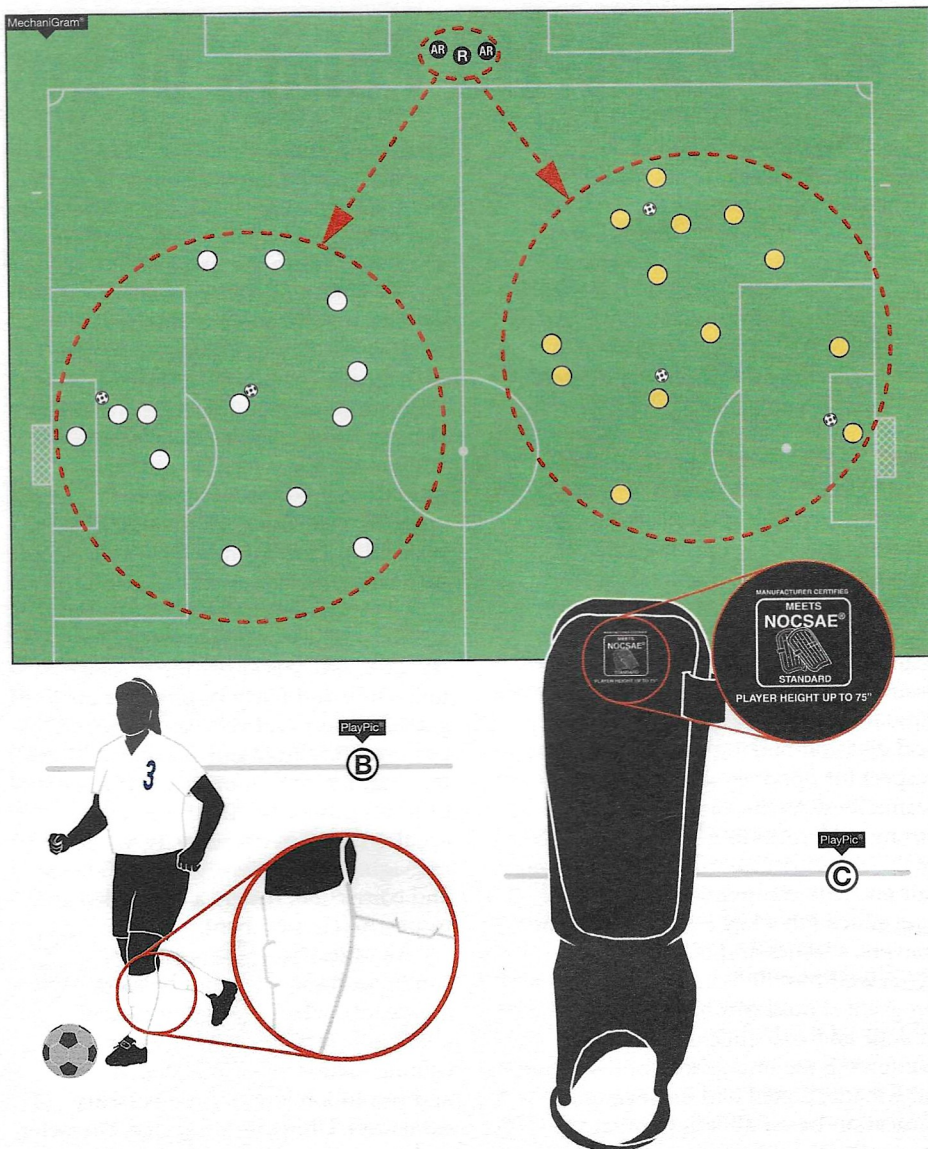


## Player Equipment (Shinguards)

Ensuring student-athlete safety is a top priority, and proper equipment plays a key role in maintaining a safe and fair playing environment. NFHS Rule 4 provides clear guidelines on required player equipment, including shinguards, which are essential for protecting athletes during competition. Given that high school players are still in their developmental stages, shinguards must be age and size appropriate, meeting NOCSAE safety standards. Each shinguard must display the NOCSAE seal, permanently marked on the front, indicating the approved height range for that model, as shown in PlayPic C.

While coaches are responsible for ensuring their players are properly equipped before the game, officials take a proactive approach by observing warmups to identify any potential concerns, as shown in the MechaniGram. Rather than conducting formal equipment checks, referees use preventive officiating by maintaining awareness during pregame activities and addressing any noticeable issues. If a player's shinguards appear inadequately sized, as seen in PlayPic B, officials should engage with the coach in a professional and approachable manner to confirm compliance.

By prioritizing communication and proactive observation, officials help reinforce safety standards while allowing players to focus on the game. A consistent and safety-conscious approach ensures that every student-athlete competes with the necessary protective equipment, contributing to a positive and well-regulated match experience. ■



## Flashback: 2024-25 Rule Changes

For the 2024-25 high school soccer season, the following rule changes were put in place.

### Required Uniform

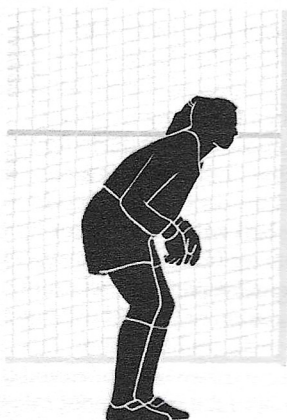
A revision to rule 4-1-4d clarified there is no limitation on the color of tape or the sock worn at or below the ankle. Above the ankle, tape or similar material (stays/straps) applied externally to the socks shall be a similar color as that part of the sock

to which it is applied, as shown in PlayPic A.

Players have the flexibility to modify socks within the existing regulations. Some players remove the foot of the sock to layer another sock underneath, enhancing comfort or grip inside their shoes. They will typically fasten the top sock around the ankle with tape. Any tape or similar material used above the ankle must match the sock's color, while at or below the






 PlayPic  
 (B)

ankle, any color is allowed. Referees are no longer required to oversee socks below the ankle.

### Fouls and Misconduct

Rule 12 received a significant revision for clarity and consistency. Sections were rearranged to enhance ease of reference, and a new section addressing Stopping a Promising Attack (SPA) was included.

As part of the overall revision, general language was modified to align with other rules codes. Two terms were changed: impeding replaced obstruction and ejection replaced disqualification.

Rule 12-6, Ejections (previously Disqualification), now provides an ordered list of offenses by severity to

allow state associations more flexibility for determining postgame sanctions for misconduct.

Rule 12-7 defines a promising attack, how to determine a promising attack and any punishments a player may receive. The new language states a promising attack is an attack moving quickly with the promise or potential to become a clear goal-scoring opportunity for the attacking team. A promising attack can occur anywhere on the field.

When determining if an attack is promising, the following considerations would include but are not limited to: distance between the offense and the goal, general direction of play, likelihood of keeping or gaining control of the ball, if the attacking team is moving forward

with speed, open space in front of the player with the ball or the presence of other attackers who could receive the ball, the player having an option to take on the defender or pass to a teammate and if the attacker has assistance from teammates.

Multiple changes were made to rule 12-8, Denying an Obvious Goal-Scoring Opportunity (DOGSO). A new article was added to clarify that all necessary conditions must be met for DOGSO to be applicable. Rule 12-8-4 now states, "If any element in article one is missing, the player cannot be ejected for DOGSO. However, this may indicate an attack is promising and additional factors should be considered." ■

## Know When Charging is Fair or Foul

**C**harging occurs when a defensive player employs body contact to cause an offensive player to give up possession of the ball. A charge can be legal — referred to as a fair charge — or illegal, resulting in a foul and/or misconduct. Knowing the correct interpretation, the proper calling of charging can be critical to the outcome of a game. Soccer rules allow for contact between two opponents as long as it is within the specified rules and not unfair.

A legal, fair charge is shoulder-to-shoulder contact with both the offensive and defensive player in an upright or erect position. This contact must occur within playing distance of the ball. Both players must have at least one foot on

the ground and the players must have their arms held close to the body. When looking for a fair charge, it is imperative to see the contact, the distance of the players from the ball, and that no pushing or holding occurs. It is possible to have a fair charge and the attacker lose their balance and even fall to the ground. If the defender is on the left side of the attacker, and uses a shoulder charge while the attacker's left leg is up (running position), the attacker could easily stumble since there is only one foot on the ground for balance. When this occurs, there may be an adverse reaction from the spectators who expect a pushing foul.

An illegal or unfair charge occurs when any of the fair-charge elements

are not present. Thus, an illegal charge includes contact in the back or front of the offensive player's body rather than shoulder-to-shoulder contact; contact while either player is completely off the ground; contact that includes pushing or nudging with the arms by the defensive player; and contact by the defensive player that occurs when the ball is not within playing distance.

In addition, an illegal or unfair charge occurs when the charge by a player is made in a careless or reckless manner and/or a player uses excessive force. Also, it is illegal to charge the goalkeeper in the penalty area unless the goalkeeper is dribbling the ball with the feet or is obstructing an attacking player.



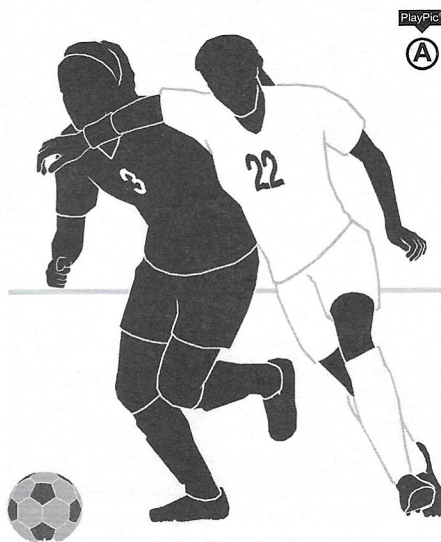
This seems like a simple rule to understand and enforce. But like many other situations that occur during play where two players are close to each other, determining a fair or legal charge can be difficult. The referee must make certain that all the elements of a fair charge exist and the contact is fair: not careless, reckless, or done with excessive force. Let's look at each of these legal requirements separately.

First of all, the legal charge must take place within playing distance of the ball. This is defined in NFHS rules as the distance between the player and the ball which you as the referee judge to be adequate to control the ball. Starting with the 2025-26 Rules Book, playing distance is defined in 12-1-2 Note as "the distance to the ball which allows a player to touch the ball by extending the foot/leg or jumping (or jumping with arms extended for goalkeepers). Playing distance depends on the speed and physical size of the player; judgement of which ultimately falls to the official." Contact occurring that is not within playing distance of the ball would not be made for the purpose of getting the opponent to give up possession of the ball, since the ball was not within playing distance and the opponent did not have control. Contact by a defensive player occurring when an attacking player is not within playing distance of the ball is penalized with a direct kick for the attacking team.

The legal contact must be shoulder to shoulder. Contact with the elbows or hands extended from the body would be considered pushing or holding which are direct free kick offenses. When shoulder-to-shoulder contact occurs, a legal charge does require both players to be in an upright position and have at least one foot on the ground. Thus, a legal charge cannot occur with a push while using the arms or hand or where one or both players are in the air. These actions are once again illegal and penalized with a direct free kick for the offensive team.

If a player has an arm extended during the charge (as shown in PlayPic A), across their opponent's body, then this would be illegal. In this instance, the referee would penalize the offending player for holding or pushing. Again, a direct free kick would be awarded. The referee must also be able to observe the feet. Although the player is attempting a fair charge, it may be possible that a

trip by the offender occurs if the legs are extended in front of their opponent. Again, this would result in a direct free kick.



A legal charge may have contact that is a bump or a push with the shoulder (as seen in PlayPic B). A legal charge cannot be made in a reckless manner or with excessive force. Running recklessly or with force into an opponent even though the other aspects of shoulder-to-shoulder contact and playing distance to the ball are present is both a foul and misconduct. This misconduct can result in a caution (yellow card) for reckless play or an ejection (red card) for disproportionate and unnecessary force against an opponent while playing for the ball.



Please note that because of the vulnerable position of a goalkeeper, the legal charge rules concerning goalkeepers differ. Charging a goalkeeper in possession of the ball with their hand(s) in the penalty area is not permitted unless the goalkeeper is dribbling the ball with their feet or obstructing a player from reaching a ball not in the goalkeeper's possession or control. Possession or control by the goalkeeper includes holding or trapping the ball with one or both hands, bouncing the ball to the ground, or releasing the ball into play. Charging by an opponent of a goalkeeper who is in possession of the ball with the hands is a dangerous foul and the opponent is to be ejected (red card) without caution for serious foul play.

As legal and illegal charges occur while opponents are often rapidly moving toward the ball and two bodies are coming in contact, not only must you as the referee have knowledge of the above rules, but you also must be in position to see what occurs including: the position of the players, the contact, and the position of the ball. Don't be like the referee in a recent video of a professional contest who missed an obvious reckless charge in the penalty area by the goalkeeper because the referee was far outside the penalty area and screened from seeing the play by players of both teams. Be near the play and in position to call charges fair (legal) or foul (illegal). ■



# How to Handle Tricky Throw-In Plays

**Play:** The ball goes into touch — crossing over the touchline and out of play — and a throw-in is awarded to the attacking team approximately 25 yards from the goal line. A1 takes the ball, moves back and runs toward the touchline. A1 then uses the ball as a handspring and flips over, landing on their feet and releasing the ball. This extra momentum from the flip causes the ball to travel into the penalty area near the goal area where A2 heads the ball into the goal.

## Is this legal?

The officiating crew and spectators are caught off guard and wonder how the player could have performed such a “trick play.” The next step is for the referees to make a decision. Is it an improper throw or a goal? This must be done quickly so that the coach and spectators recognize that the officials know the rules.

**Ruling:** In making a decision about the throw-in, the referee must analyze the technique. In this case, there is not a breach of the NFHS Rules Book. Throw-in Rule 15 requires only the following five points to be legal:

- be facing the field
- both feet or part of them on the touchline or behind it
- using both hands
- throwing the ball from behind and above the head in a continuous motion
- taking the throw-in from the place where the ball left the field

When A1 released the ball, both feet were behind the touchline, on the ground, and the ball was released from behind and over the head with two hands. The fact that they performed the flip prior to this has no bearing on the legality of the throw-in.

Oddly enough, contrary to popular belief, the rule does not require the



While a “flip throw” may look like a trick play, this technique is legal as long as the player has both feet behind the touchline and on the ground when the ball is released. The ball must be released from behind and over the head.

BOB MESSINA



player to stand perfectly straight when throwing in the ball. The flip-throw technique actually involves throwing in the ball from a crouching position, which still satisfies the definition of standing, part of a fluid motion as the ball leaves the hands. The motion serves as a “catapult” for the ball. In reality, the flip throw is no different than a player taking a run and then releasing the ball for the throw-in. It is merely a way to obtain additional distance on the throw-in.

Another example is when Team A is awarded a throw-in near the corner flag. A2 wants to throw the ball to A3 who is right next to A2. A2 kneels down

and throws the ball from behind and over the head very gently so it lands on A3’s foot. Is this legal? The NFHS rules do not address this specific play but do indicate that both feet must be on the ground.

Team A is awarded a throw-in and A2 quickly gets the ball and throws it in and hits an opponent in the back. A2 then runs on to the field and gains possession of the ball and continues down field. Is this legal? As long as A2 did not throw the ball in a violent manner, the requirements of the throw-in are satisfied. A2 can legally play the ball since it was touched by a player from Team B. This is yet

another example of a play that does not normally occur during a game but for which a referee must be prepared.

When judging a fair throw-in, the referee and/or assistant referee must only judge whether the throw-in satisfied the criteria of the rule as stated above. If so, it is a legal throw-in. If not, the throw-in is awarded to the opponents.

Soccer referees must be ready for any unusual situation that may occur during a game. A thorough knowledge of the rules will go a long way in making the proper decision rapidly and moving the game forward with minimal disruption and/or dissent. ■

## Guardian of the Shins

One of the points of emphasis for the 2025-26 season is illegal equipment, especially shinguards. Players may feel they can wear shinguards that do not meet the requirements of the NFHS rules. Micro guards or shinguards that have been altered are not permitted. This is non-negotiable.

Shinguards are required for all players (NFHS 4-1-5). Every soccer official must know what is legal and what is not. Failure to properly apply the rule could create problems for the official. It can also result in an injury to the player who is not wearing a proper shinguard. The wearing of illegal shinguards must be dealt with when observed.

Even if allowed under other rule auspices, NFHS rules are clear: it is not up to the player or coach to determine what shinguards are safe or appropriate. The specific requirements outlined in NFHS Rule 4-1-5 must be adhered to by every participant in the game.

According to NFHS Rule 4-1-5, shinguards are to provide adequate and reasonable protection; be professionally manufactured; be age and size appropriate; cannot be altered to decrease protection; be worn under the socks and worn with the bottom edge no higher than two inches above the ankle; and must meet NOCSAE standards at the time of manufacture.

This requirement is the most stringent of all the three Law/



Rule books. Under NFHS rules, the determination of age- and size-appropriateness falls to NOCSAE. It is not up to the player or coach. The NOCSAE mark must be permanently marked on the shinguard, as shown in the PlayPic. The NOCSAE mark may be anywhere on the shinguard. Also, the shinguard must be no higher than two inches above the ankle. Players participating in an NFHS game cannot wear micro guards, homemade guards or any other type of shinguard that does not meet NOCSAE standards. These requirements are very specific and the referee must ensure that they are followed.

For games played under the NFHS

rules, the referee does not have to inspect the players’ equipment, as it is the responsibility of the head coach to make sure that all players on their team are properly and legally equipped. Before the game, the referee is to ask the head coach if their players are properly and legally equipped per 5-2-2d4. If a player who is wearing improper or illegal shinguards enters the game, the coach receives a caution. For subsequent incidents for that team, the individual player is cautioned. NFHS is the only rules book that mandates the caution. While it is not required, a good mechanic is that if a referee observes a problem with shinguards, or any other equipment, the referee should advise the player to fix the problem prior to the start of the game. Preventive officiating is always good officiating. Player safety is paramount and no player should be permitted to play without shinguards or while wearing improper or illegal shinguards.

According to NFHS Rule 4-1, it is the coach’s responsibility to ensure that all players are properly and legally equipped. However, referees should be proactive and conduct a quick inspection of shinguards while players are warming up. If a player does not have shinguards on, remind them that they must be worn before they enter the game. Also, if a



shinguard is observed that does not appear to be age and size appropriate, check it for the NOCSAE seal and the size requirement that is permanently marked on the guard. Micro guards are not permitted for NFHS games. Also, if an improper shinguard is observed, advise the coach so they are aware of the problem and can ensure it is corrected.

During the course of play, it is possible that a shinguard moves to the side of the leg or even comes out from under the sock. If these situations occur, the referee should get the matter corrected at the next stoppage. If the shinguard cannot be fixed quickly, the improperly equipped player is to leave the field of play without a caution and not re-enter until the next dead ball (if

they were not replaced by a substitute) and their equipment is corrected and the referee is satisfied that the shinguard is now proper.

Every referee must remember that player safety is one of the most important duties. If a player is wearing illegal shinguards, not wearing them properly, or forgot to put them on, the appropriate action must be taken. ■

## A Handy Guide to the Handball

Over the years, there have been lengthy discussions on what constitutes a handball offense. This article will focus on the latest NFHS interpretations of handball fouls — also referred to as “handling” — and various scenarios that must be considered and how NFHS rules might differ from IFAB Laws of the Game.

Firstly, what is the hand or arm? According to Rule 12-2-2a, “For the purposes of determining handling offenses, the upper boundary of the arm is in line with the bottom of the armpit.” This definition aligns with the IFAB LOTG. When describing handball scenarios, it is common to refer to the “hand/arm” with this definition in mind. PlayPic B shows contact with the ball that would not be considered a handball foul.

Next, what constitutes a handling foul? Players cannot deliberately handle, carry, strike, or propel the ball with their hand/arm, except for goalkeepers when the ball is inside their own penalty area. The keyword “deliberately” is a major consideration for calling a handball foul. NFHS Rule 12-2-2 expands on what constitutes a deliberate handball offense resulting in a direct free kick or penalty kick.

NFHS rules and IFAB LOTG have similar interpretations of handling. Three major actions can constitute a handball offense: deliberately handling the ball, unfairly making oneself bigger with the hand/arm, or scoring a goal directly from or immediately after a handball. While the LOTG delve deeper into the nuances of accidental handball offenses, the NFHS groups everything together under the restriction on deliberately handling the ball.

Despite what spectators might think, not every touch of a player’s hand/arm with the ball is an offense. A deliberate handball is one in which a player chooses to act, regardless of the outcome of that action, and is neither a reaction nor a reflex. These deliberate actions should be easy to see. For example, moving the hand/arm towards the ball is a handball foul. Referees must be able to distinguish reactionary movements and reflexes that are different from deliberate actions.

**Play 1:** After a free kick is taken, a defending player in the wall moves their hands up to protect their face from the ball. The ball strikes their hand and falls to their feet. Is this a foul? **Ruling 1:** No, this is not a deliberate handball offense. This was an act of self-preservation: a reaction and a reflex to the ball being kicked at their face. Regardless of the consequences of the ball falling to the defender in this situation, the defender is not penalized for deliberately handling the ball.

In addition to deliberately handling the ball, it is an offense if the ball touches the hand/arm of a player who has made their body unnaturally bigger. What does this mean? Another way to put it: a player cannot take up more space with their hand/arm than what would otherwise be understood with the reality that players have hands and arms. Holding the hand/arm close to the body does not make a player bigger. Running and pumping the arms at the side does not take up unnatural space. Running with the arms extended away from the body is unnatural and doing so unfairly takes up more space with the hand/arm. A player makes their body unnaturally bigger when the position of their hand/

arm is not in a justifiable position or because of the consequences of the player’s normal body movement.

**Play 2:** A player is falling or stumbling to the ground. They reach out with their arms to brace their body. While doing so, their arm makes contact with the ball. Is this a foul? **Ruling 2:** No, because as one falls, stumbles, or slides, an outstretched arm to stabilize their balance or absorb momentum is natural and can easily be attributed to that respective action. This is not a foul.

**Play 3:** A defender moves up to mark an attacker in possession of the ball. The defender holds their arm out and away from their sides. The attacker passes the ball to a teammate, but the ball hits the defender’s hand. Is this a foul? **Ruling 3:** Yes, by having their arms in such a position, the defender unfairly made themselves unnaturally bigger and took the risk of being penalized if the ball contacted their hand/arm. This is a direct free kick foul.

After exploring these two types of handball actions, the question could be asked, “Can it be called a foul if a player accidentally handles the ball?” Under NFHS rules, the answer is no except for situations in which a goal is scored by an attacking player’s prior hand/arm contact with the ball. **Play 4:** A defender holds their arms at their side while jumping to block a shot on goal. The ball hits their arm and deflects over the goal line. Can a penalty kick be awarded for an accidental, non-deliberate handball that denied an obvious goal-scoring opportunity? **Ruling 4:** No, non-deliberate contact with the hand/arm and the ball is not a foul.

The only situation in which





accidental contact with the hand/arm and the ball is called a foul is if the offender was an attacker and the ball ends up in their opponent's goal. A player shall be penalized for handling if the ball enters their opponent's goal directly after contacting their hand/arm, even if accidental. **Play 5:** A2 takes a shot on goal. Teammate A1 is facing away when the ball accidentally strikes their arm. The ball falls to A1's feet. A1 then kicks the ball into the goal. Is this a goal? **Ruling 5:** No, this is a handball foul. Even though contact with the hand/arm and the ball was accidental, because A1 immediately scored, a goal cannot be allowed and the defending team is awarded a direct free kick.

Some questions may arise from accidental handball contact. Can the attacker be cautioned for scoring a goal

off an accidental handball? No, that would not be appropriate because the contact was accidental. However, if an attacker deliberately used their hand/arm to score a goal, based on the nature of the incident, that could be considered unsporting conduct. What if the ball accidentally contacts a defender's hand/arm and then goes into the goal? In that case, the accidental contact is not called a handball and the goal is awarded.

Lastly, it is important to remember that handball fouls are direct free kick fouls. If a defender commits a handball foul inside their penalty area, then a penalty kick is awarded. If a defender denies a goal or an obvious goal-scoring opportunity with a deliberate handball offense, then they are ejected for DOGSO regardless of where the offense occurs. If a defender stops a promising attack

(SPA) by deliberately handling the ball, then they are cautioned and shown the yellow card. These offenses are not downgraded if a penalty kick is awarded because deliberately handling the ball is not an attempt to play the ball. These sanctions do not apply to goalkeepers who handle the ball when it is inside their penalty area.

While this rule is fairly simple, it is often misunderstood by spectators, coaches, players, and even some referees for calling a foul because someone cries out, "handball ref!" In some cases, a coach or player will protest as an attempt at gamesmanship to gain a call later. The referee must be consistent in applying the rule and know all the possibilities of handling violations versus incidental contact. ■

## Soccer Injury Surveillance Study

As high school sports participation in soccer continues to increase in the United States, the number of sports injuries may also increase. The NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) and the NFHS Sport Rules Committees use information from the National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study (High School RIO™) to monitor rates and patterns of sports injuries among high school athletes. High School RIO is currently collecting the 20th year of sports exposure and injury data.

Among the nine sports included in the original sample of High School



RIO for which national estimates are constructed (i.e., football, boys' and girls' soccer, girls' volleyball, boys' and girls' basketball, wrestling, baseball, and softball), girls' soccer continues to have one of the higher injury rates, ranking second overall and in competition in the 2023/24 academic year. The overall injury rate in boys' soccer was fifth out of the nine sports included in the original sample. Both boys' and girls' soccer injury rates have remained relatively stable throughout the study period. In 2023/24, girls' soccer players had a higher overall concussion rate (6.08 injuries per 10,000 athlete exposures (AEs)) than boys (1.94), with girls' soccer having the second highest concussion rate overall and in competition among the nine original sample sports. Concussion rates have significantly increased in girls' soccer practice but not in boys' soccer practice during the study period. In the 2023/24 academic year, boys' soccer had the second highest rate of ACL injuries in practice (0.33 injuries per 10,000 AEs) out of the nine sports

included in the original sample (girls' soccer: 0.16).

Overall, the most common injury diagnosis in both boys' and girls' soccer during the 2023/24 academic year was ankle sprain/strain (boys: 20%; girls: 20%). Injury mechanisms continue to be similar between boys' and girls' soccer, with contact with another person as the most common injury mechanism in competition (boys: 44%; girls: 43%) and acute no contact in practice (boys: 30%; girls: 27%). In 2023/24, 31% of dislocations/subluxations in both boys' and girls' soccer resulted in a time loss of greater than 21 days. Understanding patterns of injury in soccer is one important tool when considering injury prevention efforts to keep soccer athletes as safe as possible.

If you are interested in more information about the High School RIO Study or you are a certified athletic trainer who is interested in becoming a reporter for soccer, please email the High School RIO team at [highschoolrio@datalyscenter.org](mailto:highschoolrio@datalyscenter.org). Please visit <http://datalyscenter.org/resources/high-school-rio-annual-reports/> to access the annual summary report referenced above. ■

### QUICK TIP

Officials sometimes interpret the laws differently. **Observe other officials and take back actual in-game situations that every official encounters to discuss with your crew, your league and your association.** Discuss thought processes and different ways to handle observed situations. Rule books and visual diagrams are great resources. A good leader will be willing to share and present what you've learned. Often times other officials will have questions or be confused by the same ruling.



# Ready, Set, Go

**P**reparing for a game isn't as simple as it sounds. Administrative, mental and physical checklists should all be completed before stepping on the field.

The first of these requirements is getting the necessary approvals and documents, joining the required referee association, participating in required training sessions, and being properly insured.

Next, become well versed with NFHS rules and mechanics. Other off-the-field preparation is needed and includes the procurement of the required uniform, shoes and equipment. This includes two whistles, two watches, red and yellow cards, and a notebook for keeping match records. Additional equipment can include assistant referee flags with or without a buzzer/beep, headsets for communicating with other game officials, a ball air pump, and fitness monitoring equipment.

Maintaining a fitness level is also essential.

Be knowledgeable in how the game assigner communicates and be aware of the contract that defines the game time, site, competing teams and other officiating crew members. Respond to the assigner that the assignment is acknowledged and understood.

Finally, match day arrives and should include contact with the other officiating team member(s) hours before the game making certain all officiating team members are still available to work, what time they are expected to arrive, and what they are required to bring to the game.

The officials' jurisdiction and on-field preparation begin when the officials arrive at the field of play and its immediate surroundings. Because of the abundance of required on-field pre-game duties, officials should arrive at least 30 minutes prior to the scheduled start. However, because of other commitments, an official may have to arrive less than 30 minutes prior to the start. The late official should communicate this with the other officiating team members and arrange for them to begin the completion of pregame duties.

Upon arrival at the field, the referee team should meet with the game administrator and learn where they will

be located during the game. Next, inspect and approve the field and surrounding area noting any safety concerns, proper field markings, location of team bench and timer/scorer's table, and proper placement of goals and corner flags; inspection and approval of the game balls; inspection of players' uniforms and equipment; providing instruction to the ball holders; obtaining both team rosters; and meeting with coaches and captains for instruction and coin toss.

When inspecting the field, check for holes, open drains, team and timer areas, non-game objects, and spectators standing or sitting closer than ten feet from the field boundary lines or behind either goal and not sitting in a bleacher. Make certain the field is properly marked. Normal areas of concern are the goal, penalty areas and the penalty-kick line. If the markings except for the penalty-kick

line are incorrect, the game can be played using the lines as is, but the problem is to be reported to the state high school association. If the penalty-kick line is incorrect, a proper placement of a penalty kick can be made at the time a penalty kick is awarded.

The goals and corner flags should also be inspected at this time. The corner flag posts must be at least five feet high with a non-pointed top and an attached flag of a bright color. The posts must be placed at each corner and may be placed one yard off the touchline at midfield. The goals must be placed on the goal line with the rear of each goal post on the outer edge of the goal line. The net should be checked for holes and also the bottom being anchored to the ground so the ball cannot go under the net. The game should not be started until the goals are correctly placed and the nets are accurately anchored.

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The team and official areas must be at least 10 feet from the touchline. The official area extends five yards on each side of the halfway line. The team areas extend from 10 yards from the midfield line for a distance of 20 yards. Having the team area markings are essential as the coaches and non-playing team members are to remain within the team area unless they are non-players warming up to enter the game or reporting to substitute or a coach who enters the field to assist an injured player. If you arrive to a multipurpose field and the team area is not marked, it is permissible to use cones or other temporarily markers to adequately delineate the team area before the game is played.

The inspection of the game balls is required because the balls must meet stated standards. The ball pressure must conform to the manufacturer's recommendation which is printed on the ball. A simple test of putting pressure on the ball with the hands and making certain if the ball is hard rather than soft is often used to determine if air must be added. However, a ball pump that measures pressure and is included in the referee's equipment is recommended. Three balls are recommended for high school contests. The game balls should be identical in size, make, grade and color and must be stamped with the approval of the game rulemaking body.

In NFHS games, the actual inspection of uniforms and equipment is not required because the team's coach is responsible for assuring players are properly and legally equipped. However, a cursory inspection is recommended to avoid future problems. Inspection items to look for are uniform colors, improper or no numbering and items on the uniforms, shinguards not being worn or worn incorrectly, players wearing jewelry, and illegal or dangerous equipment being worn. Inform the player and coach of improper and/or illegal uniforms and equipment. A knowledge of uniform and equipment requirements provided in Rule 4 is essential. In some cases it may be necessary to inform the state high school association of uniform violations.

The ball holders are an essential part of the game as they have the task of quickly getting the ball back into play. Games without ball holders can result in many minutes of lost time. One of the officials should meet with the ball holders and instruct them to keep up with play and give the ball being held to the thrower or kicker prior to retrieving the ball that went out of play. If they are not aware where the ball is to go they should look to the nearest official for assistance. Because ball holders are normally volunteers, they should also be told of their value to the game and how much they are appreciated.

Team rosters are to be given to the referee at least five minutes before the game. These rosters must contain the first and last names and numbers of all players and substitutes, all bench personnel and all substitutes. The rosters should be checked for compliance, held by the officials throughout the game, and utilized to make any postgame reports.

The coin toss includes a meeting with captains and coaches. This meeting can take place on the field near the official area or at midfield. The officiating team, captains, and coaches should be introduced. Ground rules and rules pertaining to the contest can be discussed, and coaches and captains should be asked if they have any questions. For NFHS games, coaches are also asked to verify all players will be properly and legally equipped at the kickoff. Any questions of equipment legality should be determined at this time. The visiting team captain calls the coin toss, and the winner elects to defend the selected goal or kick-off.

Finally, the head/center referee should have a pre-game conference with the other official(s). This conference can include expectations of the officials and how the crew will cover certain situations that may occur in the game. Situations often discussed are calling of offside, penalty kicks and fouls, and misconduct, substitution, and team and bench control. ■

## The Five S's

**C**linics and discussions on NFHS Rule 4 start off usually with the Five S's: shoes, socks, shinguards, shorts and shirt. We can adjust this and substitute jersey for a shirt. Five S's is just easier to remember. In high school, it is asked that the equipment not be altered and used in the way the manufacturer intended its use.

For NFHS, the referee is to ask the coach if all players are properly and legally equipped. The words legal, illegal and improper can be used in getting your point across to a team or coach in making your decision in what is acceptable and what is not. Although it is not required, it is a good preventive officiating technique to check players while they are warming up and eliminate any potential problems,

especially shinguards. If a player enters the game with illegal equipment, the head coach is to receive a caution for the first offense.

Be prepared to hear the phrase, "You're the only referee who called this on us!" Make sure future referees are aware of a team's illegal equipment so there is a consistent approach to allowing or not allowing a piece of equipment.

NFHS Rule 4-3-1 states that illegal equipment "shall not be worn by any player." It is up to the referee crew to make sure all players comply or are told to correct the problem. Improper equipment is equipment that is being worn in the wrong fashion. For example, a shinguard that moves to the side of the leg. This

can be corrected quickly and the game continues.

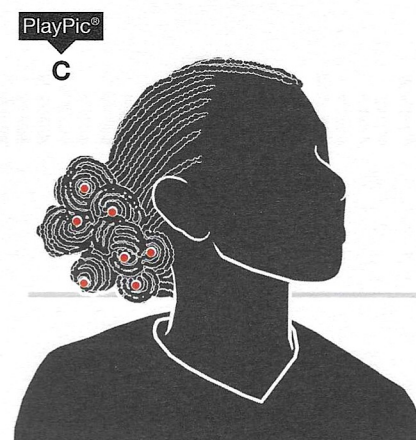
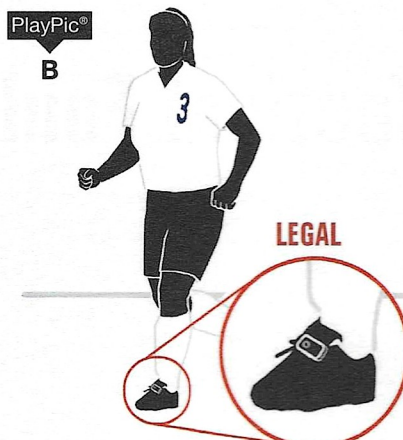
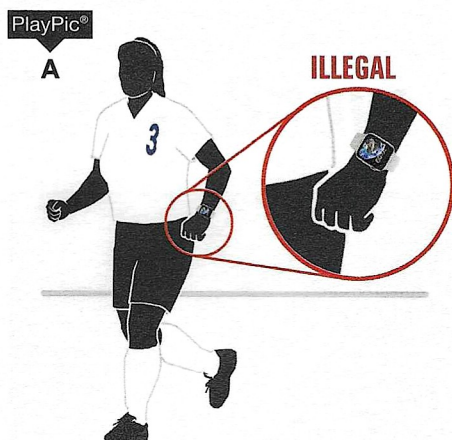
Let's go through the five S's.

**1. Shoes.** All players must wear shoes or footwear. Soles containing metal, leather, rubber, nylon, or plastic cleats studs or bars either molded to the shoe or detachable are legal as long as they are not dangerous.

**2. Socks.** Socks must all be the same and the visiting team wearing solid white. If tape is on the sock above the ankle, it shall be a similar color of the sock. Socks may be modified. It is not uncommon to cut off the foot of the sock for comfort.

**3. Shinguards.** All must be professionally manufactured and provide adequate protection. They may not be





altered and must be worn under the sock. The bottom edge of the shinguard must be no higher than two inches above the ankle. The NOCSAE seal must be on the shinguard. Micro guards are not permitted.

**4. Shorts.** Team shorts must be similar in design, pattern and color. A four-inch number is permitted on the shorts that must match the number worn on the back of the jersey.

**5. Shirts/jerseys.** The visiting team shall wear solid white jerseys. Solid white jerseys have no piping, trim or sublimation. The home team must wear jerseys that contrast with white. White sleeves, panels, or stripes on the home jersey are not allowed. Goalkeepers must have a distinctive color. All jerseys (including the goalkeeper) must have a six-inch Arabic number on the back. A four-inch number may be on the front of the jersey and/or on the shorts. The player's name, team's name or nickname may appear on the jersey.

**Other Equipment.** It is recommended that captains wear an upper arm band of contrasting color.

Jewelry is not permitted except if it is religious or medical. Make sure it is taped down to the body. A player may not tape over decorative jewelry in an effort to hide it or make it legal. It should be noted that if players are not allowed to wear jewelry, the officials should set an example and not wear any.

Religious head gear can be worn but make sure it is fitted properly. A soft padded head gear is allowed.

The NFHS allows "hair-control devices and other adornments in the hair that are securely fastened to the head and do not present a risk of injury to the player, teammates or opponents." This includes beads that are braided

into the hair, seen in PlayPic C. Beads in the hair must be securely fastened to the head so as not to swing loosely.

Tooth or mouth protectors are permitted provided they satisfy the requirements of 4-2-7.

Wearable technology devices are permitted. They must be secured, cannot create a safety hazard, may be worn on the shoes (as shown in PlayPic B) or under the uniform, and are not permitted on the arm (as shown in PlayPic A). This should be reviewed on

a regular basis to ensure the equipment is being worn properly.

Hard and unyielding items such as a cast are allowed if they are padded with foam padding not less than a half inch thick.

Face masks, if worn, must be molded to the face with no protrusions; the player or coach must have a medical exemption from the state association.

Metal ankle braces must be worn inside the socks; non-metal may be worn outside of the socks. ■

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# Understanding Tactical Fouls

In the game of soccer, a foul in its most basic sense is an unfair act. While governing bodies may have their own unique rules or laws, they all enumerate a similar set of actions that are not allowed to be committed against an opponent. These include kicking, tripping, striking, pushing, etc. When challenges involve physical contact, referees are required to judge several aspects of the players' actions to determine if a foul was committed, and if any disciplinary action is required. One key aspect referees must evaluate is the severity of the foul, which can range from "careless" to "reckless" to involving "excessive force." These classifications help determine the appropriate disciplinary action, such as a yellow or red card, based on the nature of the contact.

Equally important is the foul's impact on the phase of play. Impact consideration can elevate a normally careless foul up to the level of misconduct. Referees must be able to recognize and penalize accordingly if a foul is committed to tactically stop a promising attack (SPA) or to deny an obvious goal-scoring opportunity (DOGSO). Tactical fouls, while not necessarily severe or endangering an opponent's safety, are aimed at unfairly gaining an advantage or disrupting the opponent's attack. These types of fouls are often subtle and require keen observation from referees. They include actions like shirt pulling, impeding an opponent with the body, or last-ditch tackles.

In the 2023-24 rules book, the NFHS included the definition and criteria for DOGSO. While a tactical foul may stop an attack, it might not necessarily deny an obvious goal-scoring opportunity. In the 2024-25 rules book, the NFHS has expanded what was defined as a tactical foul and included considerations for SPA. SPA offenses might occur in the attacking end of the field and be committed by a defender to change a numerical advantage or to regroup. These types of fouls prevent the ball or player from advancing into dangerous scoring areas. Offenders might commit a tactical foul knowing



Referees must be on the lookout for tactical fouls, which include more subtle actions such as shirt pulling, impeding an opponent with the body, and last-ditch tackles.

they've been beaten and use slight, unfair contact to slow down or prevent further progress. **Play:** A1 has the ball approximately 30 yards from the goal. B2 is moving on a diagonal toward A1 and steps in front and almost completely stops. This is done to simply impede the progress of A1. There is one other Team B player and the goalkeeper closer to the goal. **Ruling:** B2 clearly committed a tactical foul to stop a promising attack.

An offense might not include all four of the required elements for DOGSO, but the presence of any DOGSO consideration may indicate the foul stopped a promising attack. As a reminder, the considerations for DOGSO are distance between the offense and the goal, general direction of play, likelihood of keeping or gaining control of the ball and location and number of defenders.

In the play described above, a DOGSO offense could have occurred if it was only the goalkeeper left as a

defender. This would be a clear attempt to deny the opportunity.

DOGSO offenses usually occur closer to the goal while SPA can occur anywhere on the field, more than likely in the attacking half. If an offense is judged to be a DOGSO foul, then the offender is shown the red card and ejected. A player who stops a promising attack is cautioned and shown the yellow card.

While both DOGSO and SPA can lead to disciplinary action, they are distinct in their nature and implications. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for referees as they shed light on the complexity and strategic elements of fouls in soccer. Referees must be able to accurately assess situations beyond just the severity of a foul and recognize the nuances of tactical fouls to better appreciate the intricacies of the beautiful game. ■



# Let It Snow

Winter soccer games can be a challenge for referees, especially when there is a cold wind and/or snow. Soccer referees should dress appropriately for the conditions, but not too much to become cumbersome. Players are also impacted and must make the same decisions prior to the game.

How can referees stay warm during a game and still be able to run without any discomfort? The NFHS provides the option of shorts or long pants (NFHS Rule 5-1-3b). This option provides the opportunity for the officiating crew to wear long pants during extremely cold weather.

There are several options that could assist the referee with staying warm. There are several clothing products that are readily available that can help on a cold day. For example, tights under the shorts will help keep the legs warmer. Referees can wear long-sleeve turtlenecks that will help keep the upper body warm and protect the neck area. Undershirts with thermal, wind stop and/or sweat protection are very helpful. Gloves can be worn, as long as they allow the referee to write and reach in their pockets easily. Lastly, a ski-type hat or a linear hood with an opening for the mouth area will keep the head warm.

Players are allowed to wear an undergarment under their shirts or shorts provided they are all in a similar color. Hats or beanies are permitted. Goalkeepers may wear long pants as long as there is nothing dangerous as part of the pants. For example, sweat-type pants would be legal, but jeans with buckles would not. Goalkeepers may wear a soft-billed baseball hat or visor.

Now that the officiating team and players are dressed for the occasion, it is time to discuss field conditions during inclement weather, especially snow. For games played under NFHS rules, the athletic administrator of the home team has the authority to determine if the field is playable prior to the start of the game (NFHS Rule 1-7-1). Once the game has started, the referee is the sole authority as to whether the game



Referees such as Chris Duran, South Ogden, Utah, must properly prepare to officiate matches in inclement weather.

should continue (NFHS Rule 5-3-2b). What are some of the conditions that must be considered? Is the field frozen hard and could players be injured if they are knocked to the ground? Is the field too muddy due to snow or rain? Are there large pools of water on the field? Is the goal area especially muddy from overuse? All of these are reasons to determine if the field is safe to play a soccer game. Remember, safety of the players is paramount over any other reason for a game to be played or not.

**Play:** An officiating team arrives at a site and it is snowing. The field is deemed to be playable by the AD. As the game progresses, snow begins to stick to the ground and the lines become obscure. Now what? **Ruling:** All rulebooks have a provision that if the lines become invisible or obscured, the lines shall be considered to be present and the officials will make the decision if the ball has wholly crossed the line. It is also permissible to have the home institution clear the markings of snow during a stoppage or at half time.

Player safety is the top priority of the officiating team. If snow gets too deep or the field becomes too slippery for safe play, the referee should suspend the game. If the field can be cleared quickly and the game resumed, that is permissible. However, if the field conditions cannot be improved, the game should not continue and a report should be submitted to the appropriate office.

When a field is still playable and the lines are covered with a coating of snow, the referee team must be ready to make decisions on whether they believe the ball is either over the goal line or touch line. The assistant referees must be able to look downfield at the corner flag to judge where the ball is in relation to the line. Good positioning is critical.

Referees must be prepared for the elements. Wearing proper attire and being prepared to make decisions on fields and player safety are two more responsibilities that the officiating team must assume. ■



# SHIELD EXAMINATION

There will be times two or more opponents come together where one player shields an opponent from getting to a ball rolling out of play. The referee must process the entire situation. What must a referee consider? If there's a foul, what are the penalties? The image illustrates what appears to be a simple decision ... but there's quite a bit to assess.

1

## Holding?

Is the white player's arm extending and holding off the blue player?

2

## Pushing?

Is the blue player pushing the white player off with a forearm?

3

## Shielding?

Is the white player legally shielding the ball into touch? Is the ball within playing distance?

5

## Retaliation?

Could one of the players get frustrated and use reckless or disproportionate force to foul the opponent? Caution? Ejection?

4

## Tripping?

Could the blue player trip the opponent from behind?

JOE MISSINA