



2023 FOOTBALL POINTS OF EMPHASIS

HELPING THE RUNNER

Rule changes have been made at higher levels of football allowing offensive teams to pile in behind and directly push the runner. Because of these changes, we are now seeing similar plays at the high school level. As guardians of the game, it is imperative that all stakeholders work together to remove “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’s main focus is risk minimization, followed closely by assurance of a balance between offensive and defensive rules. Because the players on defense must guard against the pass, they are not able to counter the advantages created by “helping the runner” formations. Allowing teams to help the runner by illegal techniques swings the balance heavily in favor of the offense.

Football game officials need to change their view of “helping the runner” to a risk issue (clipping, chop block) and remove it from the “pioneer call” category and refocus on ending plays when forward progress is stopped. Pushing the pile is legal; direct contact and pushing, pulling, lifting of the runner 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 “helping the runner” from high school football will at times be met with resistance. School administrative support of football game officials, re-focus of coaches and education of players will lead to a smooth transition. All those directly involved in our great game must stay committed to trying to minimize risk to all players and maintaining the balance between offensive and defensive play.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COACHES AND GAME OFFICIALS

Coaches and game officials must demonstrate respect for one another. This mutual appreciation is the foundation of appropriate and professional communication.

Football is an emotional game. Coaches and game officials must realize that competition often leads to intense interactions on the field. Both must work together and strive to manage verbal and nonverbal exchanges in ways that avoid escalating conflict.

Game officials must recognize their role in the game: to provide a service to the coaches and student-athletes in an unemotional and impartial manner. Game officials must always be respectful and maintain a calm demeanor in their comments to coaches, especially when tension is high. Game officials must avoid the

urge to argue with coaches who disagree with their decisions. Coaches may ask questions, and game officials should make every effort to be approachable, actively listen, and provide correct and complete answers as soon as possible. Game officials should aim to be direct and concise in their communication of essential information.

When emotions are running especially high, game officials should de-escalate tensions and demonstrate empathy and understanding of the coach's perspective. Game officials must anticipate circumstances where coaches may become upset and pre-emptively diffuse the situation. A game official should never threaten the coach with consequences for their behavior, nor should a game official become defensive. If a coach exhibits inappropriate behavior and "crosses a line," the game official may choose to penalize the coach for unsportsmanlike conduct. However, throwing a flag should be a last resort. A better approach is to clearly and calmly tell the coach that the comments or behavior are unacceptable, and that it's difficult to focus on the on-field action if the coach continues to distract the game official.

Coaches model acceptable and unacceptable behavior for their student-athletes. If coaches disrespect game officials and make derogatory comments, players will behave in the same way. Coaches should win with grace and lose with dignity. Coaches must understand that the football field is an extension of the classroom and must exhibit proper conduct. This includes respecting the decisions of game officials even when they disagree, and handling differences of opinion in a civil and dignified manner. Dialogue with game officials should be constructive and respectful, not confrontational. Handling disagreements in a business-like manner teaches players good sportsmanship, which is a perennial focus of the NFHS.

Coaches and game officials have a professional responsibility to demonstrate respect for one another and communicate appropriately. Coaches and game officials love the game and desire to positively impact young people. Proper communication during competition teaches players a valuable life lesson about conflict resolution.

GAME MANAGEMENT

Each school community must take pride in hosting an athletic contest or event. Proper advance planning is key to an orderly, secure, safe and enjoyable activity. Planning begins with clearly defined tasks for game administration and event personnel. Beginning with the arrival of players, game officials and spectators, each school must have a purposeful plan to address any and all expected issues, as well as the unforeseen.

Preparation begins with clear and concise communication between the host and the competing school regarding the logistics of arrival and departure. Meeting and greeting the visiting team is certainly the beginning of good sportsmanship. Clearly communicated information, such as parking information, location of ticket booths and entry gates, when given to the visitors is another step in assuring a great experience for all participants.

Game officials should be afforded the same communication considerations given the visiting school community. Host administration must provide accurate information for the officiating crew so as to ease any pre-game apprehension or uncertainty. Clear, concise communication is of utmost importance. Having assigned personnel to greet game officials and address all their pre-game and post-game needs is a bare minimum for the host school. Security of game officials must be an absolute priority. Make sure the locker room is properly supervised and access is limited to proper personnel only.

During the game, security of game personnel begins with ensuring that the sideline is properly secured and the playing field is restricted to essential game personnel. For safety and security reasons, essential game personnel would include game participants, reporters, photographers and game administration. All other, non-essential personnel should be located in the bleachers. All non-participants on the event level should be credentialed and restricted to being no closer than 2 yards from the sideline. Game officials are responsible for securing the team boxes and coaches' area. Sideline management begins with the consistent enforcement of game rules pertaining to the restricted area and the team box. The restricted area is designated to make

the sidelines safe for all participants and to give game officials ample space to work. Game administration should be alert to requests of game officials in addressing problems beyond the team box and coaches' area.

The conduct of non-participants is the domain of game and school administration. Expectations for the behavior of spectators and other attendees should be clearly, and repeatedly, communicated to all attendees. The reading of a sportsmanship script before the game is one method of communicating expectations. Good sportsmanship must become part of the culture of any school community. Behavior not acceptable in the school's hallways should not be acceptable on the courts or playing fields.

Appropriate conduct of the public-address announcer is vital to the game atmosphere. The public-address announcer must be the first line of sportsmanship and must exemplify expected and acceptable conduct. The goal of the public-address announcer is to inform and not entertain. Giving play-by-play of game action and/or critiquing game officials is unacceptable. The public-address announcer must be positive and respectful to all involved in the game.

MINIMAL GAME ADMINISTRATION EXPECTATIONS

- Clearly communicated event itinerary
- Required field markings and game equipment
- Clock operator(s)
- Line-to-gain crew
- Game Official accommodations
- Visiting team accommodations
- Support personnel
- Medical personnel
- Security personnel
- Hospitality for game personnel and administration, inclusive of game officials

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