

Dear Colleagues,

Fortunately (at least, from the point of view of giving me something to talk about in these newsletters) there seem to have been at least a couple of unusual situations during every round so far this season. This may say something about the sport as it is played in this country, but I suspect it is more likely that it says something about the sport itself and the very complicated rule book that we have to work with.

ILLEGAL TOUCHING AND ILLEGAL KICKING DURING A FREE KICK

As I said last week, we always try to be open and honest about any mistakes, to improve the rules knowledge of everybody including officials, so I might as well start off with an enforcement error during Round 12.

There was an attempted on-side kick, but the ball only went a few yards. In apparent frustration, the kicker decided to nudge the ball a little further with his foot. The ball was initially kicked off from the 35 yard line. Let's say, for the sake of discussion, that the illegal kicking took place at the 39 yard line, and the ball was recovered by the kicking team at the 43 yard line.

Clearly we have two events to consider - illegal touching and illegally kicking a loose ball. The former is a violation, rather than a foul. It means that the receiving team get the option of taking the ball at the spot of illegal touching. Illegally kicking a loose ball is a foul that carries a 15 yard penalty. The referee enforced a 15 yard penalty from the spot of the foul and gave the ball to the receiving team. Sound fair enough? At first glance, it might seem so, but it is wrong - in two ways.

Firstly, the illegal touching means that the receiving team get to take the ball at the spot of illegal touching **AS LONG AS THERE ARE NO ACCEPTED PENALTIES ON THE PLAY**. The only way for the receiving team to finish up with the ball after this play is for them to decline the penalty, in which case they get the ball at the 39 yard line. This is certainly an option that should have been given to the receiving team and may well have been accepted.

However, if the penalty is accepted, it should have been enforced from the previous spot, and the kicking team would have had to rekick from their 20 yard line.

Almost all penalties on kick-offs, if they occur during the kick (which means before possession is gained by either team) are enforced from the previous spot and the ball is rekick.

The only exceptions I can think of (I'm sure my officiating colleagues will add to this list if I've missed any) are encroachment on the kick-off, which can result in 5 yards on the end of the receiving team's run; a free kick out of bounds, after which the receiving team can take the ball 30 yards from where it was kicked; kick-catch interference, which results in 15 yards from the spot of the foul and gives the ball to the receiving team; and an illegal block by a player who has given a fair catch signal, which is also a 15-yard spot foul.

During Round 12 there were a couple of other fouls during free kicks - I think one was holding and one was an illegal block in the back. Those fouls were correctly enforced from the previous spot. It is more common for fouls on free kick plays to occur during the return, which changes the enforcement because the fouls have not occurred during the kick play part of the down but rather during the running play portion of the down. The basic enforcement spot is the end of the related run, and fouls by the team in possession behind the end of the run are spot fouls.

CONTACTING OFFICIALS

There were 2 situations in Round 12 involving fouls against officials, which is very concerning. The first involved a player spiking the ball after a good play, which then struck the covering official. The rule book clearly says that spiking the ball after any play is Unsportsmanlike Conduct. We have just as clearly said we are happy for plays to celebrate and enjoy the game, and will not penalise spiking unless it delays the game (5 yard penalty), or is seen to be demeaning to opponents or the ball strikes an opponent or an official after being spiked (15 yards). The player spiking the ball is responsible for what happens to it after it is spiked. Doing it in the middle of the field is therefore very dangerous. I recommend that, if it must be done, that it only occur in the end zone after a touchdown when there are no officials or opponents in danger of being struck.

The second foul occurred when a player was trying to argue some point about what happened during a play and grabbed at an officials shoulder in an attempt to get his attention. The rule book clearly states that any player who intentionally contacts an official is to be disqualified from the game. On this occasion the officiating crew considered disqualifying the player but decided to enforce a foul for Unsportsmanlike Conduct without disqualifying him. They decided to do this because the contact was slight and, to be perfectly frank (and arguably this is not a good reason to refrain from disqualifying any player who warrants disqualification, but was taken into consideration given that contact was slight) the disqualification would have reduced the team concerned to 11 players and would probably have brought the match to an end after just a few minutes' play.

I'm sure many readers will say that this was a good common-sense decision, while others will be violently opposed to the decision by the officiating crew. Be that as it may, the point that must be clearly understood is that such leniency is unlikely to be repeated.

Officials are not unreasonable, and won't penalise contact that involves a friendly pat on the back or similar gesture, but if the contact is anything other than completely friendly in nature, including an attempt to get an official's attention to argue about something, any player (or coach) making such contact in the future is almost certain to be disqualified.

I know that a number of coaches within GV don't share the contents of these newsletters with their players. I know that because players show, at times, significant lack of rules knowledge even when the rule has been clearly explained in a newsletter. However, I don't want any players to be surprised when they are disqualified for putting their hands on officials. Make sure that they understand that it is against the rules and ensure that they behave accordingly.

FACEMASK PENALTIES

There were a few situations potentially involving facemask penalties. Let me take the opportunity to clarify certain aspects of this rule.

A facemask penalty occurs when a player grasps an opponent's facemask or any helmet opening. Incidental grasping carries a 5 yard penalty. If there is any twisting, turning or pulling, the penalty is 15 yards for a personal foul. Many players talking about "accidental" grasping of a facemask, and believe that if they didn't mean to do it it should only be 5 yards. The word "accidental" does not appear anywhere in this rule. If there is any twisting, turning or pulling, the penalty is 15 yards, no matter how "accidental".

By the way, I would expect that intentional grasping of a facemask may well result in disqualification. I doubt very much it occurs intentionally very often at all.

The point here is that the covering official must clearly see a grasp. He must be able to see the fingers inside a helmet opening. Just because a hand is on or near the helmet or facemask does not mean a foul can be called. The official cannot infer from the movement of the player's head that his facemask has been grasped. He has to see the grasp.

As a result, players and coaches are always yelling "facemask" as soon as they see a hand on or near the facemask. Maybe they think they have seen a grasp. Very probably it is just wishful thinking. But that's why we have impartial adjudicators who are there to work out whether or not grasping has actually occurred, rather than coaches hoping that it has occurred. If there is no flag, it means no-one has actually seen any grasping. Either there was a grasp but no official had a clear view of it (which can easily happen) or in fact there was no grasping in the first place (just as likely, or perhaps more likely).

If a player makes continuous contact with an opponent's helmet, that is a different foul. It can occur on the line of scrimmage, but it rarely occurs. It is not a foul if it happens TO the runner or BY the runner. Within reason, it is not a foul for the runner to be tackled by the helmet. One coach in particular wanted this called as a facemask foul, but it isn't.

I certainly don't want to encourage tackling by the helmet, because it's clearly a dangerous practice. If a tackler is clearly targeting the helmet, it is likely to be flagged for unnecessary roughness. If he delivers a blow to the helmet, that's certainly a personal foul, or worse. But if the tackler appears to be trying to lay a legitimate tackle and finishes up tackling the runner by the helmet, that is probably not going to be considered a foul.

There were other occasions when the runner made contact with an opponent's helmet - the so-called "stiff arm". This is not usually a foul. If he grasps the facemask, that's a foul, and if he delivers a blow (often indicated by straightening of the elbow just before contact) that is a foul, and we had one of those on the weekend. But a runner's stiff arm that makes contact (even continuous contact) with an opponent's helmet to fend him off is not committing a foul.

CLOCK MECHANICS AFTER CANCELLED TOUCHDOWN

Normally the rules regarding the timing of the game don't concern players and coaches. Only officials get worked up over the arcane rules governing when the clock starts and stops. But after one play in Round 12 the quarterback queried why the clock was starting on the snap, rather than the ready, so I guess his confusion on the matter makes it worth a mention here.

There was a foul during which the runner crossed the goal line for an apparent score, but there was a foul against the offense which cancelled the score and resulted in a yardage penalty against the offense. Typically after a foul the clock starts on the ready - when the ball is whistled ready for play. That is true if the only reason for stopping the clock was because of the flag. However, if the clock also stopped for another reason that would normally result in the clock restarting on the snap, it restarts on the snap. If there had been an incomplete pass, or the runner went out of bounds, or a scrimmage kick crossed the neutral zone, then the clock would start on the snap whether or not there was a foul. The same applies if the result of the play is an apparent touchdown.

FOULS NEAR THE END OF THE GAME

Some players, and one coach in particular, were very concerned about the number of fouls committed by a particular opponent, and the coach was concerned about whether these fouls had occurred in the last 2 minutes of the game. All of these comments indicate some confusion over certain aspects of rules relating to Unsportsmanlike Conduct Fouls, Personal Fouls and disqualifying fouls. Let me clarify the apparent points of confusion.

There are no limits, by rule, as to how many Personal Fouls a player can commit during a game. Of course, if he continually and deliberately commits Personal Fouls, there seems to be a strong likelihood that one of them will be ruled as flagrant and result in disqualification. But if they are not flagrant, he can commit any number of Personal Fouls without any suggestion of automatic disqualification.

A player who commits 2 Unsportsmanlike Conduct Fouls is automatically disqualified for the rest of the game. I can't really go into all the differences here between Unsportsmanlike Conduct Fouls and Personal Fouls, but the main difference is that usually USC's are non-contact fouls (which means there is no contact against an opponent - intentionally contacting an official is a USC because there is no contact against an opponent).

I don't know why the coach referred to above was concerned about fouls in the last 2 minutes. Let me make this clear. There are NO changes to ANY rules in the last 2 minutes of the game.

If a player is disqualified in the last 6 minutes of a game, there is a GV rule (i.e. it is not part of NCAA rules) that requires the player to be suspended for his team's next game. I assume the purpose is to remove the temptation to commit Personal Fouls late in a game in the belief that the most game time that could be lost in the event of disqualification is a few minutes. The exception is if a player is disqualified in the last 6 minutes for having committed 2 USC's. Only if BOTH USC's were in the last 6 minutes does this result in suspension for the next game.

Finally, the players are governed by the rules of the game until the referee declares the scores final and the game over. He does this by holding up the ball and blowing his whistle. During one game in Round 12 a player committed a flagrant personal foul after the last play of the game had finished but before the referee declared the scores final. Hence, he was technically disqualified with 0:00 left on the game clock. Although he didn't miss any game time during Round 12, he is automatically suspended for his team's next game.

The opposing team expected to get an extra play out of this situation, but this cannot happen. They were talking about how "the game cannot end on a defensive penalty". This is a phrase from NFL telecasts and does apply to our game. Under NCAA rules, a game cannot end on an accepted live-ball foul (by either team). If there is a live-ball foul during a play in which time expires (at the end of any period), if the penalty is declined the period is over. If the penalty is accepted, there is an untimed down to end the period. For the purposes of this and many other rules, a USC, even if it occurs during the play, is enforced as a dead ball foul - i.e. as if it occurred after the play. If a dead ball foul occurs after the last play of a period, the period is over. Penalties can be enforced at the start of the next period, but yardage penalties for dead ball fouls after the last play of the game cannot be enforced. Nevertheless, as we saw on the weekend, flagrant fouls still require disqualification.

Regards,

Tony