

Coaches Newsletter Vol.5 No.4
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Dear Colleagues,

Sometimes in these newsletters we deal with questions as to what is and is not a foul (including today), and sometimes there are a few more arcane matters (including today) when we have unusual enforcements to discuss. I guess the only person who absolutely needs to have a good knowledge of enforcements is the referee. However, it is important that all officials have a good understanding of enforcements, so they can check on the referee and rectify any mistakes, which can occur on occasion.

I also think it is important for coaches to know what the correct enforcement is in a particular situation - not least so they can be sure they are making the right decision when the team is given options regarding the enforcement.

The point I am making is that coaches in receipt of this newsletter may, and probably will, choose to keep these questions of enforcements to themselves rather than share them with players. That's fine. However, it is crucial that more important questions of what is acceptable conduct, what constitutes a foul and when the ball is alive and dead MUST be passed on to players. It is very clear from one or two events on the weekend that this is NOT happening. I will start with those events, and I ask coaches to PLEASE pass this information on to their players for the sake of the safety of all players and the orderly conduct of games.

SECTION A - IMPORTANT ISSUES THAT MUST BE PASSED ON TO PLAYERS

DEAD BALL AFTER SCRIMMAGE KICK

There are many different ways in which the ball can become dead after a scrimmage kick, some of which I have never seen. There are 5 main ways in which this is likely to happen that I can think of.

1. A runner in possession is downed, goes out of bounds, or scores.
2. The ball (not in player possession) goes out of bounds.
3. The ball bounces in the end zone untouched by the receiving team (this results in a touchback).
4. A kicking team player is the first to take possession of the ball.
5. The ball comes to rest and no player attempts to secure it.

The point here is that nowhere on this list does it say that the ball becomes dead when a kicking team player puts his hand on the ball. I don't understand why our players think that this kills the ball - I have never seen it happen on TV. I think the time has come to get this message across once and for all.

All that happens when the kicking team is first to touch the ball is that we have illegal touching. This is not a foul. It is a violation that gives the receiving team the option of taking the ball at the spot of illegal touching. If a kicking team player puts his hand on the ball but does not take possession, a receiving team player can then come in, scoop the ball up and run with it. It is probably not my

place to be giving coaching advice, but in my opinion this would be a great idea, because it is ALMOST a free play. By that I mean that even if the receiving team were to fumble the ball and the kicking team run the ball back for a touchdown, the score would not count and the receiving team would still get to take the ball at the spot of illegal touching. The only reason this would not be the case is if there is accepted penalty by either team.

This came to a head in one game in Round 4 because, as often happens, a kicking team player put his hand on the ball without taking possession. The ball continue to roll. One or two players from each team stood around watching the ball, and a kicking team player came in at full speed and "cleaned up" a receiving team player who was standing close to the ball. In my opinion this was a cheap shot, but it couldn't be penalised because the ball was still live and the block was from the front and above the waist. (That can still be a foul - see the next section - but wasn't in this case).

The message for the kicking team is - if you want to kill the ball, pick it up. The message for the receiving team is - if the ball is live and you are potentially involved in the play, expect physical contact.

Don't stand around looking at the ball after the kicking team touch it - either pick it up and try to take advantage of their error, or stay away from the ball, because the kicking team are not going to be able to do anything with it.

It does say in my list above that the ball is dead if it comes to rest and no player attempts to secure it. The kicking team may well cause the ball to come to rest by putting a hand on it, but it is going to take a few seconds before it is clear that no player intends to secure it.

The last thing we want to do is blow the ball dead just as a receiving team player decides to pick it up and advance it, potentially preventing him from gaining significant yardage or scoring. The best way to kill the play is to pick up the ball.

PERSONAL FOUL AGAINST A PLAYER NOT INVOLVED IN THE PLAY

Rule 9-1-2-j says that it is Personal Foul if you "run into or throw yourself against an opponent obviously out of the play either before or after the ball is dead". This is sometimes a controversial rule. Some people are of the view that if you are on the field and wearing pads and the ball is live, you must expect physical contact at all times. I absolutely agree. But that doesn't let cheap shot artists off the hook.

Safety is paramount and officials have always enforced this rule and will continue to do so.

The situation described above did not come under this rule. A player standing a couple of feet from the ball is not "obviously out of the play". He could have picked up the ball and run with it (and maybe should have). On the other hand, later in the same game (and in some kind of payback if the comments of the fouling team are anything to go

by) a receiving team player dived on a rolling scrimmage kick and just as he took possession, or just after, another receiving team player violently ran into and knocked over a kicking team player standing about 8 yards away. Now, you could argue that a player about 8 yards away is potentially involved in a play, but in this case it was obvious to the officials, and would have been obvious to both teams, that this player was never going to be involved in the play.

Another situation in another game in Round 4 further illustrates the point. Just as a player was about to cross the goal line for a touchdown, a defensive player "cleaned up" an offensive player on about the 20 yard line. The ball was live, and the block was from the front and above the waist, but it was a Personal Foul and always will be a Personal Foul. A player 20 yards away from a teammate crossing the goal line is obviously not involved in the play, and although he should expect contact he is still protected by the rules and will be protected by the officials from cheap shots such as this. If I may be so bold as to infer the objective of playing by the rules, it is to win the game, not to gratuitously inflict harm on the opposition. Some people clearly think that hurting the opposition is an indirect way of ensuring victory, but there are plenty of ways to hurt opponents within the rules. Those who seek to hurt the opponent just because they can, without any regard to the rules, should expect to be penalised accordingly.

It is critically important that all players know what kills the ball and the fact that it is a foul to take out someone obviously not involved in the play. Coaches are asked to please pass this information on.

SECTION B - UNUSUAL ENFORCEMENT SITUATIONS

I don't think the following unusual situations from Round 4 represent any confusion as to what is and is not a foul - there were just a few issues regarding enforcement that caused some confusion. If you find these issues to be of interest (and I hope that's the case if you are an official) read on. If you are a coach, player or spectator who is happy to leave these issues to the officials, see you next week.

The convention is that Team A is the team that puts the ball in play. Team B is the other team. These designations do not change until the ball is next declared ready for play. The offensive team is the team in possession, and the defensive team is the other team. Clearly this can change throughout the down.

UNUSUAL ENFORCEMENT SITUATION NO. 1 - LIVE BALL PERSONAL FOUL BY OPPONENTS OF THE SCORING TEAM AND UNSPORTSMANLIKE CONDUCT BY THE SCORING TEAM

This situation arose during the play referred to above, when a defensive player took out an offensive player at about the 20 yard line while the offensive team was in the process of crossing the goal line. This is a live ball personal foul by opponents of the scoring team, and in such a situation the scoring team has the option of accepting the penalty on the PAT (taking them to the one-and-a-half yard line) or on the kick-off (allowing them to kick off from the 50).

However, the offensive team bench reacted to the hit in an unsportsmanlike manner, resulting in a flag for Unsportsmanlike Conduct.

Unsportsmanlike Conduct is referred to in the rule book as a "live ball foul penalised as a dead ball foul". Whether or not the foul occurred while the ball was live, it is penalised as if it occurred when the ball was dead. (Because of this, a score cannot be taken away from the scoring team even if they commit a USC in the process of scoring. They are penalised after the score, but the score counts).

Until this season, a USC during or after a scoring play could only be penalised on the PAT, but the rule was changed last year to give the offended team more choice. They now can choose between penalising the scoring team on the PAT or on the kick off. There are now choices to be made by both teams, in the order in which the fouls occurred. Depending on the choices made by each team, the PAT could be taken from the 18, the 16-and-a-half, the 3 or the one-and-a-half, and the kick-off could be from the 20, the 35 or the 50. I leave it to you to work out how each of these scenarios could be arrived at and which combinations are possible.

UNUSUAL ENFORCEMENT SITUATIONS NO. 2 & 3 - THE "CLEAN HANDS RULE"

During a game in Round 4, Team B intercepted Team A's forward pass. During the return, Team A grasped (but did not twist, turn or pull) the facemask of the runner. In addition, the runner (Team B) grasped the facemask of the tackler.

The first thing to point out that Team A is the defensive team during the interception runback. If the defensive team grasps (but does not twist, turn or pull) the facemask of the offensive team, that is a 5-yard penalty. If the offensive team (in this case, the return team) grasps the facemask of the defensive team, that is a 15-yard personal foul, irrespective of whether or not the grasping is incidental. I guess the rationale is that the offensive team has no business grasping the facemask of the defensive team.

What we have here is live ball fouls by both teams. In normal circumstances, live ball fouls by both teams mean that the down is replayed. This is the case even if one is a 5-yard foul and one is a 15-yard personal foul. However, this situation is an exception. It is known colloquially as the "clean hands rule".

If there are live ball fouls by both teams during a down in which there is a change of possession, if the team that finishes up with the ball did not foul before it last gained possession, it can decline penalties for fouls by the opponent, be penalised for its own fouls and keep the ball.

That last sentence is complicated, but read through it step by step and hopefully all will become clear.

In this case, the intercepting team chose to decline the 5-yard facemask penalty by Team A, was penalised 15 yards for its facemask penalty, and got the ball for a First and 10. The only alternative available to the return team would have been to allow the fouls to

offset, in which case Team A would have got the ball back and the down would have been replayed.

There was another situation in Round 4 that serves to illustrate the point. During a kickoff return, there was an illegal block below the waist by the return team and a tripping foul by the kicking team. Both of these are Personal Fouls. The return team chose to decline the foul by the opponents, accept their own 15-yard penalty, and keep the ball. Their alternative would have been to accept the opponent's foul, in which case the down would have been replayed (the ball would have been rekick) due to offsetting fouls.

UNUSUAL ENFORCEMENT SITUATION NO. 4 - ILLEGAL FORWARD PASS

The ball was on Team B's 7-yard line (i.e. Team A was 7 yards from the goal line they were attacking). In other words, First and Goal from the 7. The QB scrambled, looking for a running lane or an open receiver.

While that was happening, No. 44, who had reported in as an ineligible tackle, went downfield. The QB crossed the line of scrimmage, ran to the 4-yard line, and then threw a pass to a receiver in the end zone.

What do we have here? As a test of your knowledge, how many fouls do we have?

Clearly we have an illegal forward pass. The penalty is 5-yards from the spot of the foul, and loss of down. That would mean Second and Goal from the 9.

The other potential foul is Ineligible Player Downfield. The penalty is 5 yards from the previous spot (but no loss of down) and therefore First and Goal from the 12. Since there is a choice to be made between Second and Goal from the 9 and First and Goal from the 12, this choice was given to the Team B captain.

This brings up 2 issues.

The Team B captain chose Second and Goal from the 9, and then asked his coach for guidance, and then tried to change his mind. Sorry, but your first choice is irrevocable. The officials had started to enforce the penalty, and then the captain wanted to enforce a different penalty, which is not practicable and not legal. Don't make a choice to the referee until you are sure.

The second issue is that there is only one foul - illegal forward pass. The foul for an ineligible player downfield only applies during a down in which there is a legal forward pass. Since there was no legal forward pass, there was no ineligible player downfield.

Whether through good luck or good management, I am pleased to report that the correct enforcement was applied.

UNUSUAL ENFORCEMENT SITUATION NO. 5 - ASSISTING THE RUNNER

We had First and 10 from Team B's 20-yard line. (In some cases I am guessing with the yard lines, because I don't have the luxury of game

tape, but the substance of what I'm saying doesn't change).

Team A ran to the Team B 17-yard line, when the runner's forward progress was (almost) stopped. A teammate of the runner basically grabbed him and physically lifted him and helped him on his way. The runner then continued to run toward the end zone. The covering official knew that what he had seen was illegal and that the runner had gotten all the ground he was legally entitled to, and blew his whistle while the runner was somewhere between the 17-yard line and the goal line. Let's say, for the sake of argument, he got to the 12-yard line before the whistle went.

Test yourself. What is the correct enforcement in this situation? Then read on.

Clearly we have a foul for assisting the runner. Since the ball was still live when the whistle went, we also have an inadvertent whistle. How do we deal with that?

If there is an inadvertent whistle, the team in possession has the option of replaying the down, or taking the ball where it was when the whistle went. In the latter case, all that has really happened is that the play has ended early, and the down counts (When I say "all that has happened" I am talking only about what it means in terms of the rules.

Clearly inadvertent whistles are terribly unfortunate and the bane of an official's life. Officials treat them very seriously and do their utmost to avoid them.)

Hence, Team A has the choice of replaying the down (First and 10 from the 20-yard line) or accepting the result of the play (Second and 2 from the 12).

HOWEVER, even if there is an inadvertent whistle, all penalties are still enforced. If Team B was to decline the penalty, Team A would have the above choice. If Team B accepts the penalty, the penalty is 5 yards from the spot of the foul. That brings up First and 12 from the 22-yard line.

UNUSUAL ENFORCEMENT SITUATION NO. 6 - DEFENSIVE HOLDING

Our final play was (from memory) Second and about 14. A Tight End who was held at the line of scrimmage by the defensive team and prevented from running his pass route. The defensive team are allowed to hold if they are genuinely trying to get to the ball or the runner, but not otherwise. Clearly holding an eligible receiver is a foul, and the foul was flagged. The Quarterback scrambled, looking for an open receiver (possibly looking for the Tight End in question) and then was sacked behind the line of scrimmage.

The penalty in this situation is 10 yards from the previous spot, bringing up Third and 4. The offended team, quite understandably, wanted to know why it wasn't an Automatic First Down. Fouls involving contact against an eligible receiver, during a play in which a legal forward pass crosses the neutral zone, where the contact occurs before the pass is touched, include as part of the penalty an Automatic First

Down. In this case there was no pass. Treading warily into coaching territory once again, it seems to me that, since the QB was out of the pocket, if he had thrown the ball away (beyond the line of scrimmage) once it became clear he wasn't going to get past the line of scrimmage he would have (a) avoided the sack and (b) because of the penalty, gained for his team a first down.

I think that's all the unusual plays. The fact that we have had "unusual plays" every week so far seems to indicate that anything can, and does, happen on the gridiron.