

Coaches Newsletter Vol.5 No. 9
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WEEK 9

No unusual plays as such from Round 9, but a couple of areas in which a reminder of the relevant rule and/or the interpretation used in GV wouldn't go astray.

SUBSTITUTION INFRACTIONS

There was some confusion over substitution infractions in Round 9 - particularly the issue of breaking the huddle with 12 players. A discussion of our policy on this issue is probably overdue.

As many people know, it is a foul if the offense breaks the huddle with 12 or more players or if they have 12 or more players in the huddle for more than 3 seconds. The purpose behind the rule (and this is always helpful when it comes to devising a sensible policy for local conditions) is to prevent the defense from being confused or in any way disadvantaged. For example, if 12 players break the huddle we have 11 defensive players trying to work out how to cover the 12 emerging players, when presumably one of them is going to run off the field.

This is not always going to be called in Victoria (and my guess, the rest of Australia, but I can't speak for them). There are many fouls that are not called at all levels of the game in all parts of the world. I expect that it would be possible to call a foul on every play if you really wanted to. As I think I have made clear in the past, we only call fouls if there is a safety issue or if they have an impact on the game or in some way give one side an unfair advantage over another. This applies to substitution infractions as follows.

Firstly, if we think the offense has broken the huddle with 12 or more players in an attempt to confuse or deceive the opposition, that will be flagged. I have never seen that happen and I do not believe that that would ever happen at our level of competition.

Even if there is no attempt to confuse the opposition, if it has the EFFECT of causing any confusion then it should also be flagged. For example, if a defensive player starts to follow one of the 12, only to have to switch his coverage because that is the 12th player who is leaving the field, then the defense have been disadvantaged and the flag should be thrown. This is a dead ball foul and the penalty is 5 yards.

However, if breaking the huddle with 12 has no apparent effect on the defense, there should be flag. This is typically the case. The offense have simply made a mistake. The defense often don't even notice that the offense broke the huddle with 12 and they wait until the offense line up before covering them. Just because the defensive team's Head Coach has noticed and is looking for a quick and easy 5 yard penalty doesn't count as "noticing".

Technically a replaced player must leave immediately, and immediately is defined as within 3 seconds. Hence, if there are 12 or more players in the huddle for more than 3 seconds, technically this is a substitution infraction. However, I cannot envisage that this would be done with the intent of deceiving the opposition and I cannot conceive of it having the effect of deceiving the opposition, and hence it is unlikely to be flagged. I guess if the defense are genuinely confused as a result of this (e.g. both the quarterback and the punter remain in a huddle of 12 players for more than 3 seconds) then they are entitled to bring this to our attention and we will use our judgement from there.

If, after breaking the huddle with 12, the offense sets up in formation with 12 players, however momentarily, then we have a substitution infraction. Ideally this will always be flagged as a dead ball foul. The officials do their best to ensure that the play never runs with 12 players on offense. If this does happen, then this is a live ball foul for illegal participation with a 15 yard penalty.

It is more likely that a play will run with 12 players on defense. Technically, a replaced defensive player must also leave within 3 seconds. This gives the officials an opportunity to penalise the defense a 5 yard dead ball foul rather than a 15 yard live ball foul, which is preferable for a number of reasons. If the defense sets up in formation with 12 players, and holds that formation for more than 3 seconds prior to the snap, then a substitution infraction should be called. However, it doesn't always happen that way. If the defense is not set for 3 seconds or it is not otherwise obvious that the replaced player does not intend to depart prior to the snap, then the snap may go and a 15 yard foul for illegal participation is unavoidable.

Finally, if a defense player attempts to run off the field but doesn't quite make it, and makes no attempt to participate in the play, then (even though there are 12 men on the field at the snap) this is not illegal participation because the 12th player did not participate. At worst, this is a substitution infraction. However, if it is obvious that the player is leaving, he gets within a yard or two of the sideline before the snap and the offense do not appear to be in any way disadvantaged, then there is no harm and hence no foul.

ILLEGAL FORWARD PASS BEYOND THE LINE OF SCRIMMAGE

During Round 9 a player (the QB) ran beyond the line of scrimmage and then, just before being hit, flipped the ball forward. This is an illegal forward pass and the penalty is 5 yards from the spot of the foul and loss of down. The last part (loss of down) means that, unlike most fouls, even though the penalty is enforced the down is not repeated. The effect of this foul is that the player cost his team 5 yards from where they otherwise would have finished up. Clearly you should never throw a forward pass beyond the line of scrimmage.

If a QB is behind the line of scrimmage but out of the pocket (defined as outside the tackle) and passes the ball beyond the line of scrimmage to avoid a sack, there is no foul. (Just maybe, that's what the player in Round 9 thought he was doing. I wasn't there.) This is just an incomplete pass and we go back to the previous spot for the next down.

If the player is not out of the pocket and/or doesn't get the ball past the line of scrimmage, and intentionally throws the ball to an area where there is no eligible receiver who has a reasonable chance of catching the pass, then this is intentional grounding. The penalty is loss of down at the spot of the foul. The effect of the penalty is as if the defense managed to sack the QB before he got the pass away.

The important word here is "intentional". It is likely that the QB is being tackled as he is throwing, which can significantly affect his aim. If it appears that he was trying to get the ball to an eligible receiver, even if it finishes up going nowhere near one, then there is no foul.

SPIKING THE BALL

The rules clearly state that spiking the ball is a 15 yard Unsportsmanlike Conduct foul. We have made it just as clear that spiking the ball in a genuine act of celebration (e.g. after a score) is not considered a foul in our game if it does not delay the game, is not seen as demeaning to an opponent and does not strike an opponent or an official. If the ball bounces away and is not immediately returned to an official, this will probably result in a flag for delay of game (5 yards). If it is seen to be demeaning to an opponent, or strikes an opponent or an official, that is a 15 yard USC foul. The latter is what happened during one game in Round 9. The ball slipped out of the player's hand as he was spiking it and it struck an official. Players must be careful if they want to do this sort of thing. They are responsible for what happens to the ball if they spike it, throw it in the air or do anything other than hand it to an official.

Such acts of celebration should be confined to scoring situations. After a big play (that does not result in a score) spiking the ball is more likely to delay the game and it is more likely to be seen as demeaning. I recommend keeping celebrations under control and amongst your team after scoring plays only in order to reduce the possibility of a loss of yardage

I have also had a belated note about a situations from Round 8 - so better late than never....

KICKING A LOOSE BALL

During a game in Round 8 a player's foot inadvertently came into contact with a loose ball while he was attempting to gain possession. I am choosing my words carefully for reasons that will become clear. Although in everyday English it appear that he inadvertently "kicked" the ball, according to the definitions in the rulebook kicking involves intentionally striking the ball with the knee, lower leg or foot. Since it was ruled that the player did not intentionally strike the ball with his foot, he did not kick it.

If a player does kick a loose ball, that is a live ball foul. The flag should be thrown but the play continues. For example, the other team may decline the penalty if they get possession or otherwise like the result of the play. The penalty, if enforced, is 15 yards and loss of down.

If the player in possession illegally kicks the ball (e.g. beyond the line of scrimmage or after a change of possession) that's different. It's called a live ball foul that makes the ball dead. In other words, the flag is thrown AND the whistle is blown immediately. The penalty is 5 yards of loss of down.