

A couple of unusual plays from last weekend are worthy of note, whilst a couple of other penalties, although not unusual, are clearly worth repeating despite having previously been covered in these newsletters.

ILLEGAL FORWARD HANDING OR FORWARD PASSING

We had two instances of this on the weekend, which is quite unusual. It may be that players are being coached to consider handing off the ball when they are about to be tackled, in which case it is important to make sure that it is done legally.

Forward handing occurs when the runner releases the ball when the ball is beyond the yard line where the runner is positioned. That's a very clumsy definition, I know. How do you define the yard line where the runner is positioned? I think a practical interpretation would be that if the ball is in advance of the runner's torso when he releases the ball, then he has handed the ball forward. If the ball is level with or behind the runner's torso, it is not forward handing.

A forward pass occurs if the ball is passed and first touches a player, an official, the ground or anything else in advance of the spot where it was passed (i.e. where the passer released the ball). If it strikes anything level with or behind the spot of the pass, it is a backward pass. (There is an exception to this that is not relevant to the main point that I am making, but is nevertheless important to remember. Once the passer's arm starts to move forward, if an opponent contacts the passer or the ball, causing it to leave the passer's hand, the pass is ruled a forward pass irrespective of where it next touches a player or the ground.)

Forward passes and forward handing are only legal by Team A behind the line of scrimmage. (Team A is defined as the team that puts the ball in play).

There are further restrictions (also not strictly relevant to my main point, but important).

Team A may only make one forward pass during a down, only if the ball has not been carried beyond the line of scrimmage, only if there has been no change of possession, not to save yardage and not to conserve time unless it is thrown immediately after the snap.

Team A may only hand the ball forward to a lineman if he has turned to face his own end zone with a movement of both feet and is situated at least 2 yards behind the neutral zone.

My main point, which arises from the weekend's games, is that forward passing and forward handing are illegal if by Team B or if by Team A beyond the line of scrimmage. We had one of each yesterday. In the first one, after a fumble recovery, a Team B player passed the ball forward to a team mate as he was being tackled. He was actually trying to hand the ball, but it left his hands before being touched by his teammate, making it a pass.

In the second case, a Team A player handed the ball forward to a teammate when he was well beyond the line of scrimmage.

My recollection is that both teams carried the ball into the end zone, but the penalty is 5 yards from the spot of the foul, which means the touchdowns were called back. The fouling team keeps possession of the ball after the penalty is imposed.

ILLEGAL TOUCHING / INELIGIBLE PLAYER DOWNFIELD

We went through this in last week's newsletter, but clearly the message didn't get through. We had a player with an ineligible number lining up as a wing back. This is perfectly legal, and nothing was said until the player caught a pass in the end zone, which is of course illegal touching and an ineligible player downfield (both of which carry the same penalty). The team concerned were upset that no action had been taken until the touchdown pass was called back, but the officials are of the view that this was the first clear example of the player infringing.

Although he had been in that position all day, it seems that most plays were running plays, and the player concerned tended to remain behind the line of scrimmage on pass plays - at least until after the pass was thrown. The officials concede that he may have been downfield on an earlier pass play, and they might have missed that one. Indeed, they may have missed it on more than one occasion, and obviously they don't find that acceptable and will strive to ensure it doesn't happen in the future. Unfortunately for the team concerned it's hard to miss when the player catches a pass in the end zone!

LATE HITS

There was evidently some confusion over how a late hit is defined after a player goes out of bounds. I think it is important to make a distinction between a player who obviously goes over the sideline and a player who steps on the sideline and then continues to run with the ball within the field of play.

As I have said repeatedly, it is a personal foul to hit a player after he has crossed the sideline whether or not there has been a whistle. This is because it takes time for an official to see that the runner is out, put the whistle to his mouth and blow it. A blocker can see that the runner is out of bounds, and try to avoid contact, quicker than an official can blow a whistle. Contact is only going to be acceptable if it is unavoidable because a player has committed himself to a block, and even then the blocker must minimise the force of the impact. This means that contact has to be almost simultaneous with the runner crossing the sideline in order to be ruled legal. We know how quickly players can miss a tackle after the ball is dead, or at least minimise contact, because the fair-minded players always do so. The bottom line is that it is the responsibility of all players to know where the sideline is and when a player has crossed it.

If a player steps on the sideline but continues running within the field of play, that is different. Players are not expected to know the runner is out of bounds and are entitled to continue to play until the whistle goes. Then they must avoid or minimise contact once the whistle goes. Claiming they didn't hear a whistle is not a good enough excuse.

The whistles are loud and everyone at the ground (within 200 or 300 yards, say) can hear it. Admittedly players are focussed on the play and are wearing helmets, but if they are within 10 or 15 yards of the whistle they are responsible for knowing when it has been blown. The "didn't hear a whistle" excuse is a recipe for mayhem and cannot be condoned.

In the incident in question on the weekend, a player was penalised because the hit came so late (at least 2 full seconds after the whistle) even though the runner was still running. This has caused some concern amongst the officials, because they understand that a player's natural instinct is to tackle an opponent running with the ball. Just as defenders must avoid or minimise contact after a whistle, the offensive team are also required to stop play as soon as the ball is dead and/or the whistle goes, and they are expected to know when the whistle has gone.

The runner must stop running. If he continues to do so, he can be penalised for deliberately advancing a dead ball, which is similar to delay of game. In retrospect, perhaps this should have been enforced on the weekend. It will certainly be considered in future if the runner continues to run the ball when the play is clearly over, whether or not there is late contact against him.

As usual, comments or questions are welcome.