

II. The Rules in Depth

The kicking game can give officials more problems than almost any other phase of football. For the most part, rules covering kicking situations are quite different than those for the rest of the game, so there are more special cases to remember. Also, kicks don't occur as often as passes and running plays. Punts, for example, occur at most once every four downs, and sometimes even less frequently. Kickoffs only start halves and follow tries and field goals. So one might contend the comparative paucity of kicking plays doesn't provide enough repetition to fix the kick rules firmly in the mind. Many experienced officials feel the rules of the kicking game require more study and review than all the rest combined.

Let's get a couple of definitions out of the way early--what it means to kick the ball and what a kick is. The definition in 2-24-1 says **kicking** the ball is intentionally striking it with the knee, lower leg, or foot. The key word is *intentionally*. If the ball is rolling along the ground and a player happens to hit it with his foot while trying to recover it, he has not kicked the ball according to the definition.

Technically, there is no such thing as an "accidental kick." Kicking is a deliberate act. The word "kick" used as a noun refers to the status of the ball. Once the ball is legally kicked, it remains a kick until the ball becomes dead or is caught or recovered (2-24-2). This leads us to the definitions of **catch** and **recover**, found in 2-4-1 and 2-36-1 respectively. To "catch" the ball a player must satisfy two conditions: (1) he must gain possession of the ball before it strikes the ground and (2) he must return to the ground inbounds with the ball in his possession (the exception to the latter is discussed in Chapter 5). To "recover" the ball means the same thing for a ball that has already touched the ground. (There is more about **catch** and **recover** in the discussion of the passing game in Chapter 5.) Notice recovering the ball does not necessarily mean falling on it.

If a kick is muffed, the status of the ball is unchanged and it remains a kick (See Chapter 12). The kick ends only when a player catches or recovers the ball (obtains possession), or the ball becomes dead by rule, such as, going out of bounds.

The kicking method can be either a punt, a place kick or a drop kick. A legal punt is accomplished by dropping the ball and kicking it before it touches the ground (2-24-8). A place kick must be made with the ball in a fixed position. A

teammate of the kicker may be used to control the ball on the ground with or without a kicking tee (2-24-7). Use of an illegal kicking tee is an unfair act (see Chapter 8).

There are two kinds of kicks: free kicks and scrimmage kicks. Free kicks are those that begin a half, or follow a score or fair catch. A scrimmage kick is one made during a scrimmage down following a snap.

Free Kicks

During a free kick (2-24-3), both teams are restricted by free kick lines. Rule 6-1-1 locates the two teams' free kick lines 10 yards apart.

The 40 yard line is the kicking team's free kick line on a kickoff. A kickoff, which is the free kick that begins a half or follows a try or field goal, must be from some point *on*, not behind, this free kick line. A kickoff must be either a place kick or a drop kick. If a place kick is used (as it almost always is), a teammate of the kicker may be used to control the ball on the ground with or without a kicking tee (2-24-7).

NEW IN 2017: It is a dead-ball foul if a free kick is immediately driven to the ground, strikes the ground once and goes into the air in the manner of a ball kicked directly off the tee (pop-up kick) (2-24-10, 6-1-11).

The change was made so the receiving team is ensured of fair catch protection for kicks that go high into the air. Kicking the ball along the ground as is frequently done for onside kicks is legal as long as the ball does not rise an appreciable height above the ground and can be mistaken for a kick in flight.

EXAMPLE 6-1: On an onside kick attempt, K15 kicks the ball directly into the ground. The ball bounces about 20 feet into the air and is coming down about 10 yards from where it was kicked. **RULING:** The ball is immediately dead when the kick is made. Team K is penalized five yards and will re-kick.

The kicking team's free kick line for the free kick which follows a safety (which is not a kickoff, by definition) is the 20 yard line. If Team K uses a punt or a drop kick, it must be made from within one yard behind the free kick line (6-1-2). Note the

Chapter 8: Major Fouls

Players who may block low in the zone.	Players who may be blocked low in the zone.
Offensive players in the zone and on the line at the snap.	Defensive players in the zone and on the line at the snap.
Defensive players in the zone and on the line at the snap.	Offensive players in the zone and on the line at the snap.
Players who may block in the back in the zone.	Players who may be blocked in the back in the zone.
Offensive players in the zone and on the line at the snap.	Defensive players in the zone at the snap.

Table 8-1

Chop Block

A **chop block** is a combination block by two or more teammates against an opponent other than the runner, with or without delay, where one of the blocks is at the knee or below and the other block is above the knee (2-3-8).

The penalty for a chop block is 15 yards and is enforced under the "all-but-one" principle (9-3-6).

Such contact outside the zone is an illegal block below the waist. If the opponent has disengaged from the first block when the second block occurs, there cannot be a chop block.

EXAMPLE 8-9: Second and 10 at the A-33. While right guard A68 is blocking defensive tackle B76 above the waist at the A-35, left guard A60 pulls and joins A68 in a double-team. A60 blocks B76 at the knees. **RULING:** Chop block (high-low). If accepted Team A will be penalized 15 yards.

EXAMPLE 8-10: First and 10 at the A-20. A66 blocks defensive tackle B78. The impact knocks B78 backwards. A66 then turns to his left and blocks B70. While B78 is no longer contacting A66, he is blocked below the knees by A64. A64's block takes place after the ball has left the free-blocking zone. **RULING:** This is not a chop block; however, A64 is guilty of blocking below the waist. If accepted Team A will be penalized 15 yards.

Here are some key points regarding chop blocks.

- Both offensive and defensive players can be guilty of a chop block
- Two high blocks are legal in situations where blocking is allowed.
- Two low blocks are legal in situations where low blocks are legal.

- High-low or low-high blocks are chop blocks.
- When in doubt, the contact is at the knee or below.

Additional Examples: 8-10.

Blindside Block

Action which includes identifying and taking aim on an opponent who is not aware of any pending contact increases the potential for serious injury to one or both of the players and must be minimized. Officials need to be aware of situations that are likely to produce unnecessary or excessive contact. Blindside blocks often provide windows of opportunity for these potentially dangerous contact situations to occur; thus a definition of a blindside block has been added.

NEW IN 2017: A blindside block is a block outside of the free-blocking zone against an opponent other than the runner who does not see the block coming (2-3-10).

Blindside blocks include, but are not limited to:

- Blocks by a player on offense who initiates a "peel back" block toward his own end line or a "crack back" block toward the spot of the snap;
- Blocks by a Team R player during a free kick or scrimmage kick play where the Team R player is running toward his end line and blocks an opponent who has either just turned to pursue the runner or is running roughly parallel to the end line in pursuit of the runner;
- Blocks by a player on offense after the runner abruptly changes direction as in a reverse play;

- Any open field block against an opponent whose primary focus is on the runner or the ball and who does not see the block coming.

When a player does not know he is being contacted, the risk of injury increases significantly. If a player can see the block coming, he can prepare for the contact. A blindside block is particularly dangerous because the blocker is often running at full speed while the opponent may be in the process of turning to pursue the runner.

A forceful block with the shoulder at the level of the opponent's chest is more than what is necessary to achieve the football purpose of eliminating or delaying a tackle. Blocks initiated with open hands are significantly less dangerous because the blocker typically cannot generate the same amount of force on the opponent's body as he can with his shoulder.

NEW IN 2017: It is now illegal to initiate a blindside block with forcible contact unless made with open hands (9-4-3n).

EXAMPLE 8-11: B30 is pursuing runner A22 at the B-40. A80 runs roughly parallel to the B-40 and blocks B30 with his shoulder. At the time of the block, B30 (a) was focused on A22 and did not turn toward A80 or visibly prepare for contact, or (b) tried to ward off A80's block. **RULING:** A foul in (a) because B30 did not see A80 approach. A legal block in (b) because B30 saw A80 before the block was initiated.

Most blindside blocks are made in situations where a block is necessary to promote the movement of the runner, thus this rule is designed to eliminate excessive contact. Contact away from the play may still be judged as unnecessary or excessive if the action is not near the point of attack and the player blocked had no chance of influencing the play. For action in the free-blocking zone such as trap blocks, even though the defensive player may not see the block coming, it is not a foul.

Once a player is blocked, contact with the ground is inevitable. It is critical that officials observe the entire blocking action. Whether the blocked player ends up on the ground or not is *not* a factor in determining if the block was legal.

EXAMPLE 8-12: A7 throws a screen pass to A22 at the A-38. A22 is at the A-42 and linebacker B55 is pursuing him across the field. A80 has gone five yards downfield, reverses direction, approaches B55 and blocks him at the A-43 with (a) his shoulder, or (b) open hands, knocking B55 to the ground. **RULING:** A foul for an illegal blindside block in (a) and a legal block in (b). In (b), the fact that a player was knocked to the ground does not necessarily make the contact an illegal block; the technique was legal.

If the initial contact is with open hands followed by contact with the torso, it is a legal block. When in doubt, it is a foul for an illegal block.

EXAMPLE 8-13: A12 throws a screen pass to A22 at the A-38. A22 advances to the A-42 and linebacker B55 is pursuing him across the field. A80 has gone five yards downfield, comes back and blocks B55 at the A-43 with open hands, then compresses into a shoulder block, which slides down below the waist while contact is maintained. **RULING:** The block is legal; the block was initiated with open hands.

Additionally, for a blindside block to be a foul, the contact must be forcible. That can be generally interpreted to mean that if the opponent is not knocked to the ground, the contact is not forcible.

EXAMPLE 8-14: On a punt return, R26 blocks K42 from the side just as K42 is turning to pursue the runner. R26's block is with his shoulder and breaks K42's stride but does not knock him down. **RULING:** The blindside block is not a foul because the shoulder contact was not forcible contact.

There is no exception if the player who is blocked is in the process of making a tackle.

EXAMPLE 8-15: During a run by A35, B22 is one step behind and has one hand on A35's shoulder pad attempting to make the tackle when he is blindsided from the side by A60. The contact was (a) a shoulder-leading block, or (b) an open hand block. **RULING:** In (a), an illegal blindside block; in (b) a legal block.

Players whose actions are so severe and abusive and are meant to intentionally (flagrantly) punish an opponent should result in disqualification.