

SERIOUS FOUL PLAY



It's time to get serious about Serious Foul Play. Seriously.



What is serious foul play anyway?
Let's take a look at the following clip:

<https://youtu.be/na7ZrwuS3b4>



This challenge should be a red card for serious foul play.

The NFHS Rule:

“A player, coach or bench personnel shall be disqualified (red card) for: . . . d. committing serious foul play: 1. any play in which the player commits one of the offenses punishable with a direct free kick (or penalty kick if the offense takes place by a defender in the penalty area) and uses

disproportionate and unnecessary force against an opponent while playing for the ball.” NFHS Rule 12-8-2-d-1.

The rule book defines serious foul play (SFP) as “A tackle or challenge that endangers the safety of an opponent [or] uses excessive force or brutality must be sanctioned as serious foul play resulting in disqualification. Any player who lunges at an opponent in challenging for the ball from the front, from the side, or from behind using one or both legs, with excessive force or endangers the safety of an opponent is guilty of serious foul play.” NFHS Rule 18-1-100. (This language is identical to [IFAB Law 12.](#))

The Rule Restated:

SFP requires:

- (1) A tackle or challenge (i.e. some play for the ball)
- (2) Against an opponent
- (3) With one of the following present:
 - (a) Endangers the safety of the opponent; or
 - (b) uses excessive force or brutality; or
 - (c) lunges at an opponent with one or both legs from any direction and (i) endangers the safety of an opponent or (ii) uses excessive force

Does the SFP Rule say anything about the player's intent? No.

Can you only call SFP if the player "meant to" take out his/her opponent? No.

We look at the player's *actions* not the player's intent. (A player acting *maliciously* may give us some clue about what is happening and why, but malice or intent are *not* required for SFP.)

Will I seriously know if it's Serious Foul Play?



A couple quick notes. Lunging alone is not SFP. It is only SFP if the player lunges *and* endangers the safety of the opponent or uses excessive force. If something involves excessive force or brutality when *not challenging* for the ball, the misconduct is Violent Conduct (VC), and VC can be against anyone—not just an opponent.

By contrast, Reckless Play (a form of Unsporting Behavior (UB)) "Reckless Play" occurs when "A player has acted with disregard of the danger to, or consequences for, the opponent. A player who displays

reckless play shall be cautioned." NFHS Rule 18-kk.¹ Unsporting behavior is punished with a caution and includes reckless play

In analyzing SFP, VC, or UB we use the considerations which are posted on the [TCSRO Education Page](#).

Evaluating SFP in our Video Clip using Considerations

In our video, two high school teams are playing. White's goalkeeper has gained the ball and sees a quick opportunity to roll the ball to his White teammate almost in the center of the field about 15 yards away. A Green player near the bench side spots this and runs about 22 yards to try to intercept the pass. White realizes Green is coming and suddenly has to act quickly. Green slides with his left leg locked and studs exposed, and his studs make contact with White's calf.

¹ This is identical to [Law 12 of the IFAB Laws of the Game](#): "A player has acted with disregard of the danger to, or consequences for, the opponent. A player who displays reckless play shall be cautioned."

From our video, what considerations support SFP?



Is Green challenging for the ball?

Yes.



Is Green coming in with speed/intensity?

Yes.



Does Green use his studs when making the challenge?

Yes.

Where is contact made on White?

Calf.

Which part of green made contact?

Left foot/studs (leg locked)

Does Green lunge from side or behind?

Yes.

Does Green's act endanger White's safety?

Yes.

Does Green act with disregard for White's Safety?

Yes.

Was the force necessary and reasonable to make the challenge?

No.



Correct Result:

Direct Free Kick for White

Red Card for SFP to Green.

Bigger Picture Analysis

Positioning (and, uh-oh, this is a Two-Man Crew!)

The most serious problem in this SFP clip is that this is a two-man system. This is like asking the assistant referee to make this decision. The referee (who calls this) is not in a good position to see it and probably has at least a few players between him and the play. The referee cannot be there to head off trouble or try to prevent anything (remember the [free kick positioning video](#)). Unfortunately, unless schools are willing to step up, we are going to continue to see fewer referees available to cover games and more two-man crews who just cannot be in position.

This is also a good reminder that sometimes, the coaches have a better view of a play than we do.

There are clues this SFP is about to happen.

Nothing on the field happens in a vacuum. Here, White is winning 7-0. Nothing in this game was necessarily suggesting Green was upset with White nor is this a particular play or spot on the field we should necessarily be really worried about. However, the White goalkeeper releases the ball into an open area of the field.

White seems surprised the ball is coming to him, and he is late to react.

The next clue is we have a player in a nearly stationary position with the challenger moving at them with high speed. This is a warning sign that a poorly timed challenge may be coming because it is much harder to make a controlled tackle while moving at a high rate of speed.

Intent does not Matter

Remember, intent does not matter. Whether the player “meant to” take out the other guy is not in the rules.

We can easily think: I really do not want to send-off this player because “he didn’t mean to” do that—but the fact remains, the player did, in fact, do that. Whether the player “meant to” is irrelevant. When the player has endangered the opponent’s safety or used excessive force or

brutality, then it is serious foul play and a red card. The point is: it is okay to red card a player who commits serious foul play. More importantly, when the considerations for SFP are met, give the red card!

Remember, *safety is the priority!*

Managing the Situation

As soon as the Green challenger leaves his feet, we need to be thinking “this is not good.” At the same time, we need to be sprinting to the spot of the foul. Is anything good likely to happen after a foul like this? What is Green saying to White while he leans over him?

Obviously, in this clip, we catch a break and there’s not a fight, but the potential for a mass confrontation following this kind of tackle is very high. The referee needs to be there immediately.

Check out [this clip](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKY_omwNQWw) with a bad challenge: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKY_omwNQWw

The referee is immediately on top of the players. The message is sent: “I am here. I’ve got this” and helps head off problems *before they start*. Also great to see is the AR has approached and is helping manage the situation.