

**THE
REDDING
STUDY GUIDE
TO**



**NFHS
Football Rules**

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CHAPTER 6 THE KICKING GAME

I. 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 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).

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).

This ensures the receiving team 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 inflight.

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 pop-up kick is made. Team K is penalized five yards and will re-kick.

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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 **step** behind their free kick line (6-1-2). Note the 20 yard line remains the free kick line even when Team K punts or drop-kicks the ball from behind it.

These free kick lines can be moved by a penalty. In this event, the free kick lines are still 10 yards apart. The space between them is the **neutral zone** (2-28-1).

The kicking team must have all their players behind their line, except the holder and the kicker who may be beyond the ball. A violation of that provision is encroachment (6-1-3a).

When the ball is kicked, the kicking team must have at least four players on each side of the kicker (6-1-4).

EXAMPLE 6-2: When the ready is blown for a kickoff, Team K has (a) six players to the left of kicker K3 and four players to his right, or (b) seven players to his left and three players to his right. **RULING:** Legal in both cases. In (b), if a player to the left of K3 does not move to his right before the ball is kicked, a foul will occur. In that case, the whistle should be blown immediately for a dead-ball foul.

After the ball has been made ready for play and until the ball is kicked, all players on the kicking team except the kicker must be no more than five yards behind their free kick line (6-1-3b). A player satisfies this rule when no foot is on or beyond the line five yards behind K's free kick line. If one player is more than five yards behind the restraining line and any other player kicks the ball, it is a foul for a free kick infraction (Signal 19).

EXAMPLE 6-3: On the kickoff to start the game when the ready is whistled, (a) all Team K players are (a) between the A-40 and A-35 except for kicker K2, who is standing at the A-33, or (b) huddled between the A-35 and A-30. **RULING:** Legal in (a), but a dead-ball foul in (b).

There are no other restrictions on Team K's formation (2-14-3). There is no requirement, as with scrimmage downs, for players to be within the nine-yard marks after the ready-for-play (7-2-1).

Once a spot is designated, the kick must be made from that spot (6-1-2). Adjusting the ball on the tee or moving it from the ground to an adjacent tee is not considered changing the designated spot (2001 interp., Sit 15). Faking a kick is legal.

If a kicking team player goes out of bounds before a change of possession, he cannot return inbounds for the remainder of the down (9-6-1), unless he was blocked out. Please note Team R players may inadvertently go out of bounds, and there is no foul if they return inbounds since they cannot gain an advantage by doing so. See Chapter 10 for further discussion and examples.

Team R may not have anyone beyond their free kick line before the ball is kicked. There is no rear restraining line. Team R's 11 players may be anywhere behind their free kick line.

The clock starts when the ball is touched other than first touching by Team K (3-4-1a, 3-4-3).

Additional Examples: 1-5.

Possession and Advance

The kicking team is allowed to touch a free kick after it touches (6-1-6):

- A Team R player; or
- The ground and is or has been beyond Team R's free kick line;

Those two events may occur in either order, but once either one occurs, then not only is Team K allowed to touch the ball, they retain possession if they catch or recover it.

Although the following example would be rare, it illustrates the rule.

EXAMPLE 6-4: K19's kickoff is airborne over the R-48, but a gust of wind blows it back to the K-47 where it touches the ground and the first player to touch it, K90, makes the recovery. **RULING:** Team K's ball; the kick broke the plane of Team R's free kick line (traveled 10 yards) and touched the ground.

As 6-1-6 points out, Team K is not allowed to advance the kick. The ball is dead by rule if the kicking team catches or recovers the kick—that is, before Team R gains possession.

Touching by the receiving team does not give Team K the right to advance it, because it is still a kick until a player gains possession. However, if Team R catches or recovers the ball, it remains live and the kick has ended. Team R may advance the ball unless any Team R member has given a valid or invalid fair catch signal (6-1-5). This is now a running play and kick rules no longer apply. If a Team K player intercepts or recovers a subsequent fumble, for example, he is allowed to advance the ball as with any other fumble.

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Again, once the ball travels 10 yards and touches the ground, both teams are entitled to possession, but Team K cannot advance the ball.

EXAMPLE 6-5: K12's kickoff is short and lands at the R-48 where it is scooped on the bounce by K49 who takes it to the R-30 before being tackled. **RULING:** Team K is entitled to retain the ball, but cannot advance it. The ball is dead when K49 recovers and it belongs to Team K at the R-48.

Here we have an opportunity to demolish one of the cherished myths of football--"A muff may not be advanced." Well, sure it may. If a pass receiver muffs a forward pass and it is then intercepted, we'd all agree the defensive player may return it. The muff has nothing to do with it. What the kicking team may not do is advance a *kick*, and a muffed kick remains a kick.

The muff does not change the status of the ball--it is still a forward pass, or it is still a kick, or it is still a fumble - whatever it was before it was muffed. (See Chapter 12.)

First Touching

If Team K touches the ball in the field of play before Team R does, and before it has gone the requisite 10 yards, then Team K has committed a violation for "**first touching**" (2-12-1).

That isn't a foul, so no flag is thrown. There is no yardage penalty, no foul by the opponent is offset, nor is the ball dead if Team K merely touches it without gaining possession. The whistle certainly should not be blown and play continues, but the clock does not start (3-4-3).

The term is somewhat of a misnomer as there can be more than one spot of first touching. Perhaps "violation touching" is more descriptive.

As long as Team R does not touch the ball and subsequently foul, or there is not an accepted penalty for a player foul, or offsetting fouls, Team R may elect to take the ball at any spot of first touching (6-1-7). Team K may not keep possession, even if it recovers a muff or a fumble, as this is the price for having touched the ball too soon.

EXAMPLE 6-6: On a kickoff, K88 touches the ball at the K-48. As the play continues, R20 gains possession, carries the ball for a few yards and fumbles. K29 recovers the ball and is tackled. **RULING:** The first touching by Team K gives Team R the option of taking the ball at the K-48, so the fumble recovery by Team K is for naught.

In situations such as Example 6-7, Team R is entitled to the ball at the spot of first touching (or spots, if more than one) or to the result of the play.

EXAMPLE 6-7: K30 touches the kick at the K-47 which touches K42 at the K-49. R44 recovers the ball and advances to the K-45. **RULING:** The K-47 and K-49 are both first touching spots, but Team R will accept the result of the play; first and 10 on the K-45.

The next example further demonstrates the impact of first touching.

EXAMPLE 6-8: K12's kick glances the leg of K50 at the K-46, is touched by R64 at the K-48 and is recovered by K72 at the R-49. **RULING:** Although Team K was entitled to possession at the R-49, first touching occurred at the K-46. The ball belongs to Team R at the spot of first touching.

If Team R is the first to touch the ball, first touching by Team K no longer applies, even if the ball has not gone 10 yards.

EXAMPLE 6-9: R45 touches the kick at the K-46, K76 then touches it at the K-49 and the ball is recovered at the R-47 by: (a) R55, or (b) K27. **RULING:** First touching does not apply since Team R was the first to touch the kick. K76's touching is legal and the result of the play stands.

Some interesting situations can arise. In Example 6-6, suppose Team K fouls. Certainly Team R will refuse the penalty to gain possession of the ball at the spot of first touching. But, if Team R fouls, it is critical *when* the foul occurs, because the timing will govern the result. On the one hand, if Team R fouls any time before R20 touches the ball, then the penalty, if accepted, will be enforced from the previous spot and Team K will re-kick. On the other hand, if Team R fouls after they touch the ball, Team K will decline the penalty and keep the ball.

In the heat of battle, this can be quite confusing. The short answer is this: If no penalty is involved and if the kicking team commits first touching, it will not get the football. If there is a foul, be careful and think it through.

It is not first touching if a Team R player pushes or blocks a Team K player into contact with the ball (6-1-7), but it is likely a foul (more on that later). Also, Team R's touching is ignored if Team K pushes Team R into the ball or a Team K player muffs the ball into a Team R player in the

neutral zone (the 10-yard area between the teams' free kick lines). The exemption applies only within the free kick neutral zone; it is meaningless beyond the neutral zone, since Team K may legally recover and retain possession beyond Team R's free kick line (6-1-6).

EXAMPLE 6-10: Team K tries an onside kick from the K-40. Before the untouched kick has traveled 10 yards, R62 blocks K50 into the ball at the K-45. K57 recovers the ball and is downed at the K-47. **RULING:** Because K50 was blocked into the ball, his touching is disregarded. However, K57 is guilty of first touching. Team R will most likely accept the first touching privilege and put the ball in play at that spot, the K-47.

Additional Examples: 6, 7.

Free Kick Becomes Dead

A free kick becomes live when the ball is legally kicked (2-1-2). Here are the ways a free kick becomes dead:

- It goes out of bounds (4-2-2b);
- It breaks the plane of Team R's goal line. It doesn't matter if it has been touched by either team. It is a touchback and the ball belongs to Team R (4-2-2d1);
- A Team K player catches the kick (4-2-2f). This is most likely a foul as discussed later;
- A Team K player recovers the kick (4-2-2f);
 - The ball belongs to Team K if it is recovered after having been beyond Team R's free kick line, unless there was first touching (5-1-5b);
 - The ball belongs to Team K if it is recovered anywhere after Team R was the first to touch it (6-1-6);
 - The ball belongs to Team R if Team R has not touched the ball and the ball has not traveled the 10 yards to Team R's free kick line (5-1-5c);
- Team R makes a fair catch (4-2-2g);
- Team R gains possession after a valid or invalid fair catch signal (4-2-2g).
- It is in joint possession of opponents (4-2-2e1). The ball belongs to Team R (5-1-3e); or

- It comes to rest and no one attempts to secure possession (4-2-2e2). The ball belongs to Team R (5-1-3e).

Free Kick Out of Bounds

If a free kick goes out of bounds between the goal lines after Team R touches it, it is put in play at the inbounds spot by Team R (6-1-10).

However, if a free kick goes out of bounds between the goal lines before Team R touches it, it is a foul by Team K (6-1-9). Team R has four options in this case:

- Have Team K kick again following a five-yard penalty;
- Put the ball in play at the inbounds spot on the side of the field where the kick went out of bounds 25 yards beyond Team K's free kick line (normally their own 35 yard line);
- Put the ball in play following a five-yard penalty enforced from the succeeding spot; or
- Decline the penalty and take the ball at the inbounds spot.

The option to have the penalty enforced from the succeeding spot negates declining the penalty (taking the ball at the out-of-bounds spot) as a viable option.

EXAMPLE 6-11: Following a kickoff from the K-40, K21 is the first to touch the ball at the K-46, causing it to roll out of bounds untouched by Team R at the K-49. **RULING:** Team K is guilty of first touching and a foul for a free kick out of bounds. Team R has the following options: (1) decline the penalty and take the ball at the K-46 which is the spot of the first touching; (2) accept the five-yard penalty and have it enforced from the succeeding spot (the K-49) which would put the ball at the K-44; (3) accept a five-yard penalty from the previous spot and have Team K re-kick; (4) put the ball in play at the near inbounds spot 25 yards beyond the previous spot (the R-35); or (5) take the result of the play and get the ball at the K-49. The best choice is succeeding spot enforcement.

When an inbounds player of the receiving team touches a kick that subsequently goes out of bounds untouched by another player, then the receiving team has caused the kick to go out of bounds (6.1.9A).

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When a receiving team player who is out of bounds is the first to touch a kick, the kicking team has caused the ball to go out of bounds. It does not matter if the ball is inside the plane of the sideline when it is touched.

EXAMPLE 6-12: R24 is standing with one foot out of bounds when he receives Team K's free kick before or after it touches the ground inbounds. When R24 touches the ball it is (a) beyond the sideline plane, or (b) over the field of play. **RULING:** In (a) and (b), it is a foul by Team K for a free kick out of bounds. The ball is out of bounds because it touches a player who is out of bounds (6.1.9C). It is not a foul for a Team R player to unintentionally go out of bounds.

If because of penalties the ball is kicked from a point such that placing the ball 25 yards beyond the previous spot would put the ball in Team R's end zone, that option cannot be offered (6-1-9 Pen, 6.1.9H).

Additional Examples: 7-9.

Fouls during Free Kicks

Penalties for fouls by Team K (other than kick catch interference) on any free kick may be enforced at the previous spot with the down repeated, or; at the succeeding spot when Team K will not be next to put the ball in play (10-4-2b & Exc).

EXAMPLE 6-13: While the ball is loose following a free kick, K12 blocks R50 below the waist at midfield. R30 catches the kick at the R-30 and is downed at the R-43. **RULING:** K12's penalty will be enforced from the succeeding spot, which is the R-43. Team R will snap the ball from the K-42.

In addition to a free kick out of bounds which was previously discussed, the next more likely fouls by Team K during a free kick (encroachment or a free kick infraction) are dead-ball fouls. Illegal blocking is discussed in a later section.

For kick-catching interference, if Team R accepts the penalty, they may have the 15-yard penalty enforced from the previous spot with a replay of the down, or an awarded fair catch after enforcement of a 15-yard penalty from the spot of the foul (6-5-6 Pen).

The option to have the penalty enforced at the subsequent dead-ball spot still applies if there is a change of team possession. The only requirement

is that the ball will not be next be put in play by Team K.

A penalty for a foul by Team K can never be enforced from a spot of first touching which is not also the dead-ball spot because acceptance of a penalty for a live-ball foul cancels the right to take the ball at the spot of first touching. Succeeding spot enforcement is discussed further in Chapter 11.

Once Team R possesses the ball, the kick has ended. The penalty for any subsequent foul is enforced as a running play after a change of possession.

Additional Examples: 5, 10-11.

Opportunity to Catch a Free Kick

During any free kick, members of the receiving team must have an unhindered opportunity to catch the ball (6-5-6). Kicking team players must not obstruct the receiver's path to the ball if, in the judgment of the covering official, he has a reasonable opportunity to catch the ball and is in a position to do so. There is no specific distance requirement (no "halo" rule). In non-contact situations, it is strictly a judgment call as to whether the receiver has been obstructed. Kicking team players may be guilty of obstructing the receiver's path to the ball even if they are stationary.

Whether or not the receiver has signaled for a fair catch has nothing to do with this rule; kicking team players must stay out of his way in either case.

If a player of the kicking team touches the ball, obstructs the receiver, or contacts him while the kick is in-flight, then it is a foul for interference. Team R may decline the penalty and accept the result of the play, accept a 15-yard penalty from the previous spot and replay the down, or an awarded fair catch after enforcement of a 15-yard penalty from the spot of the foul (6-5-6 Pen).

EXAMPLE 6-14: K21's untouched free kick is caught by K54 and there are no Team R players anywhere near the spot of the catch, which is made at the (a) K-47, or (b) R-46. **RULING:** Kick-catching interference in (a) and (b). In (a), it is also first touching by K54.

It is highly unlikely for this foul to occur in the end zone, since the ball is dead when it breaks the plane of Team R's goal line.

Notice this protects Team R's opportunity to catch the kick. In other words, if the ball has touched the ground, the receiver no longer has

protection since, by definition, he no longer can catch the ball. Also, once the ball touches a teammate of the receiver, there is no protection. Restrictions end when a Team R player touches the ball, so the receiver may be contacted immediately if he muffs the ball (2003 interp., Sit 7).

Being blocked by an opponent into the receiver or his path is not a foul.

Blocking

The kicker or place kick holder may not be blocked before they have advanced five yards beyond their free-kick line or the kick has touched the ground or touched another player. This is a 15-yard penalty for an illegal block (9-3-4, 9.3.4).

During a free kick, Team K is prohibited from initiating contact to block an opponent until they are eligible to recover the ball, the ball has gone 10 yards or the receiving team initiates a block within the neutral zone. If any of the preceding occur, blocking is permissible, unless it is otherwise illegal per another rule e.g., kick-catching interference. The penalty is 10 yards for an illegal block (9-3-7). Kick-catching interference is discussed later in this chapter.

EXAMPLE 6-15: While K2's kickoff is rolling free and untouched, K45 blocks R23 in the front and above his waist. At the time of K45's block the kicked ball was (a) six yards, or (b) 11 yards, beyond Team K's free-kick line. **RULING:** In (a), an illegal block, a 10-yard penalty from either the previous spot and re-kick or from the succeeding spot. In (b), a legal block.

Additional Examples: 11-13.

Scrimmage Kicks

Punts and field goal attempts, including those on a try, constitute the other class of kicks: scrimmage kicks. A field goal attempt may be either a place kick or the nearly obsolete drop kick. If a place kick is used, the ball must be controlled on the ground or a tee by a teammate (2-24-4).

A scrimmage kick is a legal kick made in or behind the neutral zone during a scrimmage down before a change of team possession. That is, the ball must be kicked legally, in a manner allowed by the rules. A scrimmage kick is legal if the foot that contacts the ball is not beyond the neutral zone when the kick is made (S&I 2-24-4). Illegal kicks are discussed later in this chapter.

Scrimmage kicks are usually made from a scrimmage-kick formation (see Chapter 3), but may also be attempted from a scrimmage formation. There are no restrictions on Team K players going downfield before the kick.

Although rare, a second scrimmage kick or a scrimmage kick after a completed pass, would be legal as long the ball is kicked in a legal manner in or behind the neutral zone before a change of team possession.

Right to Advance

Barring a fair catch signal, which we'll discuss later, any scrimmage kick (other than a try) can be caught or recovered by the receiving team and advanced (6-2-2). For the kicking team, there are several restrictions.

Perhaps the key question for an official to ask on any scrimmage kick is:

IS THE BALL BEYOND THE NEUTRAL ZONE WHEN IT IS TOUCHED?

Before we answer that question, let's make sure the related definitions are understood.

The **neutral zone** (2-28-1) is the rectangular area between the teams' scrimmage lines: its width is the length of the football.

The **expanded neutral zone** extends two yards beyond the defensive line of scrimmage in the field of play (2-28-2). The purpose of expanding the zone is to permit normal line play by allowing offensive linemen to block and drive defensive linemen off the line of scrimmage. The zone disintegrates immediately when the kick has crossed the expanded zone or when the trajectory is such that it cannot be touched until it comes down (6.2.6).

REMEMBER FROM 2022 (Editorial): It was clarified the neutral zone cannot be expanded into the end zone on a scrimmage kick play (2-28-2, 6-2-6). *Note: The ball is dead when a scoring kick which has apparently failed enters Team R's end zone (4-2-2d2).*

A scrimmage kick has crossed the neutral zone when it touches the ground, a player, an official or anything that is beyond the neutral zone.

The following applies to scrimmage kicks which are not "low" i. e., the trajectory is such that it cannot be touched until it comes down. As a practical matter, a low scrimmage kick is a field goal attempt which is blocked in the vicinity of the neutral zone or a shanked punt which is similarly