

**THE
REDDING
STUDY GUIDE
TO**



**NFHS
Football Rules**

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Chapter 6: The Kicking Game

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 as 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

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blocked. The touching of such low kicks is treated slightly differently and will be discussed later.

Back to the question "is the ball beyond the neutral zone when it is touched?"

If the answer is YES:

- There is no longer a line-to-gain (the continuity of downs is broken);
- If the ball is untouched by Team R after crossing the expanded neutral zone on a punt and is declared dead, then the ball belongs to Team R at the dead-ball spot (6-2-7) or at the spot of any first touching by Team K (6-2-5).
- If Team R is the first to touch the kick, then Team K may catch or recover it and retain possession (5-1-4, 6-2-4) (see Example 6-16);
- Team K may not advance the kick. The ball is dead as soon as Team K gets possession (4-2-2f) (see Example 6-16);
- Team K may not be the first to touch the ball (6-2-5). If this happens, it is a violation - first touching (see Example 6-23 and the following section).

If the answer is NO:

- Either team may catch or recover the ball and advance it. If a Team K player gets it, he may run, pass, or even kick the ball again (6-2-2 and 6-2-3) (see Examples 6-18 and 6-20).
- The continuity of downs is not broken, even if Team R had touched the ball behind the neutral zone. That means the down counts and Team K must make it to the line-to-gain in order to retain the ball (see Example 6-19).

However, if the kick is a low scrimmage kick any touching in or behind the expanded neutral zone is ignored (6-2-6). If it is touched beyond the expanded neutral zone by Team R the ball will belong to the team in possession at the end of the down (5-1-3f, 5-1-4). Such touching in flight by Team K is ignored unless a Team R player is in position to catch the ball in which case it is kick-catching interference (6.2.6).

Here are plays where the answer to the above question is YES.

EXAMPLE 6-16: K27's field goal attempt is partially blocked behind the neutral zone and is muffed by R95 beyond the expanded neutral zone. The muffed ball is recovered (a) behind, or (b) beyond the neutral zone by K33. **RULING:** In both cases, it is a first down for Team K. In (a), K33 could have advanced after recovering the ball.

EXAMPLE 6-17: Fourth and 10 on the K-40. K11's untouched punt is rolling downfield at the R-40 when K89 scoops it up and takes a few steps with the ball. **RULING:** The ball should be whistled dead when K89 gains possession. Team K cannot advance the ball. It's Team R's ball, first and 10 at the R-40.

It is essential to know where Team R touches the ball in relation to the expanded neutral zone. If Team R has not touched the ball beyond the expanded neutral zone and Team K recovers it there, then the ball is dead and it is simply first touching. However, if Team R has touched it beyond the expanded neutral zone and Team K recovers, then Team K retains possession and is awarded a new series. Remember, the ball is dead if Team K catches or recovers a kick beyond the expanded neutral zone; Team K may not advance the ball regardless of touching by Team R.

And plays where the answer to the above question is NO.

EXAMPLE 6-18: Fourth and 10 on the K-40. K18's punt hits the ground at the (a) K-45 or (b) K-38. In either case, it bounces back untouched to the K-35. K25 grabs the ball and advances to the R-20. **RULING:** In both cases, K25's recovery and advance are legal; first and 10 for Team K on the R-20. In (a), although the ball crossed the neutral zone, Team K did not touch it there. It does not matter if the ball remains behind the neutral zone or crosses the neutral zone and returns there; either team may advance it (6-2-2 and 6-2-3).

EXAMPLE 6-19: Fourth and six on the K-30. K2's short punt strikes the ground at the K-35 and caroms untouched back to the K-25. There, R43 muffs the ball while trying to grab it and K28 falls on the ball at the K-23. **RULING:** Since R43's touching did not occur beyond the neutral zone, the touching is ignored. Since the ball is recovered short of the line-to-gain, Team R takes over first and 10 on the K-23.

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If the ball is behind the neutral zone when Team K gains possession, Team K may run, pass, or even kick again since team possession has not changed.

If the ball was not touched first by Team R beyond the zone, the ball remains live and belongs to Team K with the down counting (5-1-4). Thus, if a fourth down punt is blocked and then recovered and downed by Team K behind the neutral zone, a new series is awarded to Team R (5-1-3c). It does not matter if Team R touches the ball behind the neutral zone. This has nothing to do with the kick rules, as Team R simply takes possession on downs because Team K has failed to advance the ball beyond the line-to-gain. Had the same situation occurred on, third down, Team K would keep the ball and snap on fourth down.

EXAMPLE 6-20: R78 blocks a punt and the ball does not cross the neutral zone. K24 recovers and advances beyond the neutral zone where he is tackled short of the line-to-gain. This happens on (a) third down, or (b) fourth down. **RULING:** In (a), Team K will have fourth down at the yard line where K24 is tackled. The clock continues to run. In (b), the ball goes over on downs to Team R, first and 10 at the yard line where K24 was tackled. The clock stops when the ball is dead and starts on the snap since a new series was awarded after a legal kick.

If the ball is touched first by Team R beyond the expanded neutral zone, the ball also remains live and will belong to whichever team is in possession at the end of the down (5-1-3f). If Team K recovers a ball behind the zone, touched first by Team R beyond the zone, and then throws an incomplete forward pass while behind the zone, the ball will belong to Team K at the previous spot (5.1.3C).

EXAMPLE 6-21: Fourth and 10 on the K-45. K22 punts the ball beyond the neutral zone. R55 muffs the ball back behind the neutral zone where K8 recovers the ball at the K-40 and throws an incomplete forward pass. **RULING:** Since R55 touched the kick beyond the expanded neutral zone, it will be a new series for the team in possession. Thus, it is a first down for Team K at the K-45. The pass is legal as there had been no change of team possession.

A critical play arises when there is simultaneous recovery of a kick. Simultaneous recovery of a *fumble* awards the ball to the team

last in possession (7-4-3c). But in the case of the kick, 5-1-3e and 5-1-5d make it clear joint possession is awarded to the receiving team.

EXAMPLE 6-22: Team K's punt is blocked, never crosses the neutral zone, and winds up back in Team K's end zone where opposing players simultaneously recover it. **RULING:** By 5-1-3e, it is a touchdown for Team R.

Be prepared for this one, because Team K's coach is sure to go ballistic. This is an excellent example of where the kick rules are very different from the rest of the game.

It is worth mentioning third down punts which likely would be a "quick kick." Teams quick kick to improve field position, so the play will be a surprise to both the officials and the defense. The kick will likely be made from a scrimmage formation, so normal numbering applies and the snapper is not protected.

If the kick is not touched beyond the neutral zone and stays inbounds and either remains behind the neutral zone or returns there untouched, it is simply a loose ball and is treated the same as a fumble. If the ball goes out of bounds anywhere, the ball belongs to the receiving team at the out-of-bounds spot. If the ball is touched beyond the neutral zone, normal punt rules apply. Touching by the kicking team is first touching and if initially touched by the receivers it will belong to whomever gets final possession. See Additional Example 14.

Additional Example: 14, 15.

First Touching

First touching of a scrimmage kick is a violation which benefits the receiving team by giving them the option to take the ball at the spot of the first touching (6-2-5). First touching applies only when Team K touches the ball when they are not entitled to possession (2-12-2). Thus, on a scrimmage kick, first touching can occur only beyond the expanded neutral zone. First touching does not apply if the ball is at rest.

EXAMPLE 6-23: K5's punt is rolling downfield when K82 touches it at the R-20. The ball (a) comes to rest at the R-10 and is blown dead there, (b) is picked up by R26 at the R-10 and advanced to the R-30, or (c) is picked up by R33 at the R-10 who retreats and is downed at the R-5. **RULING:** In (a) and (c), Team R will choose the spot of first touching, the R-20. In (b), Team R will take the result of the play, first and 10 on the R-30.

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As with free kicks, this option is canceled if Team R touches the ball and thereafter during the down commits a foul, or if any penalty is accepted for a player foul (including offsetting fouls) by either team. It is important to note first touching *does not kill the ball*. If the ball is at rest, it becomes dead when Team K touches it, but by definition (2-12-2), it is not first touching.

EXAMPLE 6-24: Team K's punt is beyond the neutral zone and is first touched by K68. Receiver R27 picks up the ball, returns it for 10 yards, and fumbles. The ball is then recovered and downed by K19. R62 clipped during R27's return. **RULING:** Team K may keep the football by declining R62's penalty. Since Team R fouled after they touched the kick, their option to take the ball at the spot of first touching is canceled.

Also, it is important to note that if the first touching is canceled by an accepted penalty for a live-ball foul or if Team R fouls after touching the kick, it doesn't cancel the fact the ball belongs to the receiving team at the dead-ball spot.

EXAMPLE 6-25: Fourth and 10 at the K30. K2's punt hits the ground and prone K80 recovers it at the R-20. During the kick, R66 holds at midfield. **RULING:** Team K will accept the penalty which cancels Team R's privilege to take the ball at the spot of first touching. However, the spot of first touching and the dead-ball spot are identical. Consequently, Team R's legal possession of the ball is not impacted.

Forced touching by either team is disregarded. Touching of a free kick or scrimmage kick is ignored if it is caused by a player batting or muffing the ball into contact with an opponent or caused by a player pushing or blocking an opponent into contact with the ball (6-2-4, 6-2-5).

Additional Examples: 16-21, 23.

Scrimmage Kick Out of Bounds

If a scrimmage kick goes out of bounds between the goal lines, it belongs to the receiving team at the inbounds spot (6-2-7). Team R gets the ball regardless of the down, whether the ball crossed the line, whether it went out of bounds beyond or behind the line, or which team touched it last. Also, it does not matter if it is a punt or field goal attempt.

Additional Example: 14.

Scrimmage Kick Becomes Dead

Here are the ways a scrimmage kick becomes dead:

- It goes out of bounds;
- A non-scoring kick breaks the plane of Team R's goal line;
- A Team K player catches or recovers the ball while it is beyond the neutral zone (4-2-2f);
- Team R makes a fair catch or gains possession after any valid or invalid fair catch signal;
- It comes to rest in the field of play and is touched by Team K or no player attempts to secure it. The ball belongs to the receiving team;
- It comes to rest in Team K's end zone and no player attempts to secure it. It is a safety or touchback (6-3-2); or

EXAMPLE 6-26: K13's punt comes to a rest at the 50-yard line and K32 immediately places his hand on the ball and quickly removes it. R43 grabs the ball and races into the end zone. **RULING:** The ball became dead when K32 touched it while it was at rest. There is no touchdown.

- It is in joint possession of opponents. The ball belongs to the receiving team.

Additional Examples: 17, 23-25.

Opportunity to Catch a Scrimmage Kick

The rules regarding the opportunity of the receiving team to catch a scrimmage kick are the same as for a free kick with one difference. The kicking team may not obstruct the path of the receiver, or contact him before he touches the ball, unless blocked into the ball or the receiver, or to ward off a blocker, but they may touch or catch the ball if no receiver is in position to catch it.

EXAMPLE 6-27: K25's untouched punt is caught by K32 and there (a) are no Team R players near the spot of the catch, or (b) is a Team R player in position to catch the ball. **RULING:** No foul in (a), but kick-catching interference in (b).

EXAMPLE 6-28: K14 punts and the kick goes well downfield. As R27 is about to catch the kick, K36 waves his hands near R27's face (face guarding), but makes no contact. **RULING:** Since K36 hindered R27, it is a foul for kick-catching interference. Team R's choices are: a 15-yard penalty from the previous spot with the down replayed, an awarded fair catch after enforcement of a 15-yard penalty from the spot of the foul, or decline the penalty and take the result of the play.

EXAMPLE 6-29: Fourth down on the K-40. K15 punts. Deep receiver R29, realizing the kick is short, is running forward trying to reach the kick, but has to go around K58, who came within an eyelash of contact. **RULING:** R29 has the right of way. If the covering official judges K58 hindered R29, it's kick-catching interference.

EXAMPLE 6-30: Same as the previous example, except R85 blocks K57, who then runs into R29. **RULING:** K57 is excused from his contact because he was blocked into the receiver.

The opportunity to catch a kick ends if the ball is muffed (6.5.6E, 2003 interp, Sit 7).

EXAMPLE 6-31: While K1's punt is in flight beyond the neutral zone, R20 does not give a fair catch signal. The ball strikes R20 on the shoulder and bounces high into the air. While the loose ball is still airborne, K45 pushes R20 in the chest and K45 catches the ball at that spot. **RULING:** There is no foul for kick-catching interference since R20's protection ended when the kick was muffed. The ball is dead when K45 catches it; Team K's ball, first and 10 at the spot of K45's catch.

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

Additional Examples: 22, 23.

Field Goals

The rules which govern punts and unsuccessful field goal attempts are identical except as to when the ball becomes dead. Scoring kicks remain live after breaking the plane of Team R's goal line in-flight until ruled successful or

unsuccessful unless the ball touches a Team K player.

EXAMPLE 6-32: On fourth down at the R-30, Team K attempts a field goal. The kick is short and (a) Team R touches the ball at the R-10 and it then rolls into and out of the end zone, (b) Team R touches the ball at the R-10 and it rolls out of bounds at the R-5, (c) The ball is untouched beyond the neutral zone and comes to rest at the R-7, or (d) The ball lands at the R-25, rebounds untouched behind the neutral zone, and rolls out of bounds at the R-34. **RULING:** In (a), touchback. Team R's ball, first down and 10 at the R-20; in (b) Team R's ball, first and 10 at the R-5; in (c) Team R's ball, first and 10 at the R-7; in (d) Team R's ball, first and 10 at the R-34.

Be careful about first touching of an unsuccessful field goal attempt. The rules regarding first touching by Team K are the same as for any other scrimmage kick. Team R can advance an unsuccessful field goal attempt as long as the ball does not break the plane of the goal.

EXAMPLE 6-33: Team K's unsuccessful field goal attempt is rolling along the ground at the R-10 where K35 touches it and: (a) R26 tries to pick up the ball, but muffs it out of bounds at the R-5, or (b) the ball rolls dead at the R-12. **RULING:** In (a), Team R's ball, first and 10 at the R-10, the spot of first touching. In (b), Team R's ball, first and 10 at the R-12; the spot of first touching will be refused.

A field goal attempt on a down other than fourth may occur near the end of a half when there is only enough time for one more play. The kick will likely be made from a scrimmage kick formation, so there must be at least four players numbered 50-79 and only the snapper can have an eligible number. He cannot be an end and is ineligible.

If the kick is not touched beyond the neutral zone, stays inbounds, and either remains behind the neutral zone or returns there untouched, it is simply a loose ball and is treated the same as a fumble. If the kicking team recovers behind the neutral zone, it will be fourth down. If the ball goes out of bounds anywhere, it belongs to the receiving team at the out-of-bounds spot. If the ball is touched beyond the neutral zone, normal punt rules apply. Touching by the kicking team is first touching and if initially touched by the

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receivers, it will belong to whomever gets final possession.

Additional Examples: 23-25.

The Try

It is well to remember a kick on a try is also a scrimmage kick. However, the try is a unique part of the game and has special rules. The kick try is like a field goal attempt, but there is a significant exception. Unlike a field goal attempt, the kick try ends whenever Team R gains possession or it is otherwise apparent the kick will not score (8-3-2a, b). It does not matter whether or not the ball crosses the neutral zone or breaks the plane of Team R's goal line.

The try will be covered further in detail when we discuss scoring in Chapter 9. Penalty enforcement for fouls during and after a try are discussed in Chapter 11.

EXAMPLE 6-34: Team K's kick try is blocked at the line of scrimmage. The ball rolls: (a) behind, or (b) beyond the neutral zone where it is recovered by K34 who carries the ball over the goal line. **RULING:** In (a) and (b), the ball is dead when it is apparent the kick will not score.

Fouls during Scrimmage Kicks

Penalties for fouls on scrimmage kicks are treated differently depending on which team fouls. Team R fouls which do not qualify for post-scrimmage kick enforcement, are enforced from the previous spot.

Penalties for fouls by Team K (other than kick catch interference) on any scrimmage 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 (10-4-2 Exc).

EXAMPLE 6-35: Fourth and seven at the K-35. Team K has five players in the backfield at the snap. R39 catches the punt at the R-30 and is tackled at the R-35. **RULING:** If Team R accepts the penalty for the illegal formation foul they may elect to have fourth down replayed at the K-30 or they may put the ball in play at the R-40. The clock starts on the ready if the down is replayed or on the snap if Team R is to next snap the ball.

EXAMPLE 6-36: Fourth and 10 on the K-40. (a) Before the kick, K64 holds at the K-38, or (b) while the ball is rolling downfield, K79 clips at the R-30. The punt rolls out of bounds at the R-37. **RULING:** Either foul can be enforced from the previous spot with fourth down replayed at the K-

30 in (a) or the K25 in (b). Either penalty could also be enforced from the succeeding spot, the R-37. After enforcement, it will be Team R's ball first and 10.

EXAMPLE 6-37: Fourth and six at the K-35. Team K has five players in the backfield at the snap. R39 catches the punt at the R-30 and is tackled at the R-35. Team R then commits a dead-ball foul. **RULING:** The penalties will be enforced in the order of the occurrence of the fouls starting with the live-ball foul. The referee should explain to Team R's coach that to keep the ball, Team R must have the penalty for Team K's live-ball foul enforced from the succeeding spot. This will be followed by enforcement of the penalty for Team R's dead-ball foul, so that Team R will have the ball at the R-25. The clock starts on the snap.

Note in the above example that if Team R elects to have the illegal-formation penalty enforced from the previous spot, Team K will retain possession of the ball, with a first down due to enforcement of the penalty for Team R's dead-ball foul. The referee should ensure this mistake is not made.

EXAMPLE 6-38: Fourth and seven at the K-35. Team K has five players in the backfield at the snap. R39 catches the punt at the R-30 and is tackled at the R-35. Team K then commits a dead-ball foul. **RULING:** Team R has a viable option to have the illegal-formation penalty enforced from the previous spot because of field position. The penalty for the dead-ball foul would then be enforced from the spot where the five-yard penalty leaves the ball, resulting in a replay of fourth down at the K-15. The clock would start on the ready.

Again, the referee should explain the options carefully to the Team R coach.

Penalties for Team R fouls during scrimmage kicks are enforced from the previous spot unless the foul is governed by post-scrimmage kick enforcement rules. Post-scrimmage kick enforcement allows the receiving team to retain possession of the ball after they have forced the opponents to punt, even though the receiving team commits certain fouls before possession actually changes. There are also special enforcement rules which apply when Team R fouls during a try. Both of these types of fouls are discussed in Chapter 11.

Additional Example: 16.

Contacting the Kicker

Arguably the most vulnerable player on the football field is a kicker with his leg in the air on a follow-through. Consequently, the rules provide kickers and holders special protection from contact by the defense. A player becomes a **kicker** when a knee, lower leg or foot makes (deliberate) contact with the ball (2-32-8).

A **holder** is a player who controls the ball on the ground or on a kicking tee (2-32-7). The kicker and place kick holder are protected from contact by the defense (9-4-5).

While incidental contact is not a foul, a foul should be ruled if the contact is sufficient and could have been avoided regardless of whether it was apparent a kick would be made.

EXAMPLE 6-39: K10 in punt formation moves two or three steps to recover an errant snap or recovers a snap over his head. K10 then punts and is contacted by R72. **RULING:** A judgment call; the key is whether the contact was avoidable. A bad snap is not an excuse in and of itself for the defense to contact the kicker.

There are two penalties for illegal contact with a scrimmage kicker or holder (9-4-5). Whether the foul is **roughing** or **running into** is obviously a judgment call. Roughing the kicker is a personal foul and includes any act that endangers the safety of the kicker or holder. The penalty for roughing is 15 yards from the previous spot and an automatic first down. Running into the kicker or holder is a foul that occurs when the kicker or holder is displaced from his kicking or holding position but is not roughed. The penalty is five yards from the previous spot with the down repeated.

EXAMPLE 6-40: Fourth and 10 on the K-20. After K5's punt is in flight and untouched by any Team R player, R55 (a) tries to avoid K5, but brushes K5's shoulder, causing K5 to stagger to maintain his balance; (b) tries to avoid K5, but bumps his shoulder, causing K5 to lose his balance and fall; or (c) charges into K5's chest, knocking him to the ground. The penalty is accepted in each case. **RULING:** In (a), no foul; that is incidental contact. In (b), R55 is guilty of a five-yard penalty for running into the kicker. If accepted, the five-yard penalty is enforced from the previous spot. The result is fourth and five from the K-25. In (c), R55 is guilty of a 15-yard personal foul for roughing the kicker. Team K will likely accept the penalty, which includes an

automatic first down. The penalty yields first and 10 for Team K at the K-35.

As previously mentioned, incidental contact is not a foul. If contact is slight and partially caused by the unexpected or unnecessary movement of the kicker, no foul should be called. There are three specific instances in which contact may not be avoidable. The first happens when it is not reasonably certain a kick will be made. Examples include an unexpected punt on the run (rugby-style kick) or a kicker who chases an errant snap and abruptly kicks the ball.

Second, if the kicker or holder is contacted by a defensive player who touches the kick and the contact was unavoidable, there is no foul. The ball must be touched near the spot of the kick and the defender may not stop and renew his charge into the kicker, nor may he change direction. Touching the kick, in itself, is not a license to contact the kicker. If the player who contacts the kicker is not the player who touched the kick, the contact *may* be excused. However, it is a foul if one player blocks the kick, but another roughs or runs into the kicker when the contact is avoidable (9.4.5A).

EXAMPLE 6-41: Fourth and 10 on the K-30. On the K-22, K9's punt is partially blocked by R29, but the kick carries well downfield. Within a second or so of touching the kick, R29 and R35, who was right next to R29, contact K9, knocking him to the ground. In the referee's judgment, neither R29 nor R35 could avoid the contact with K9. **RULING:** Legal.

Finally, being blocked into the kicker by a member of Team K is exempted. This means, for example, if a Team R player attempts to block the kick and contacts the kicker because of being blocked by a Team K player, then there is no foul.

In summary, there are three situations in which contact may not be avoidable:

- It is not reasonably certain a kick will be made;
- When the kick is touched; or
- A defender is blocked into the kicker or holder by a member of the kicking team.

A potential punter and a holder are runners by rule when they receive the snap. Consequently these players may be contacted or tackled while they are in possession of the ball. If so, the play is legal and any fumble resulting from the tackle is allowed.

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On occasion, the potential punter may be contacted or tackled after he releases the ball, but before the ball is kicked. If the contact causes the ball to fall to the ground without a kick, there is no question as to the legality of the play – a fumble has occurred. However, if the ball is kicked, normally or abnormally, the referee has a very difficult judgment to make.

It should be noted that a player who has released the ball for a punt and is beginning to raise his foot to kick the ball is just as vulnerable as a player who has kicked the ball; however by rule, he is not provided protection until he kicks the ball (9.4.5G).

Additional Examples: 26, 27.

Rules Common to Both Free and Scrimmage Kicks

Batting

For the most part it is illegal to bat a kick. The exceptions are listed in the next section. Batting is further discussed in Chapter 8. Batting a field goal attempt is discussed in Chapter 9.

Touching

Here is a summary of the rules regarding the touching of a kick:

- The receiving team may always catch or recover a kick, free or scrimmage, anywhere in the field of play, and advance;
- If Team K touches any kick before they may legally retain possession, it is first touching. Such touching is not a foul, but a violation. The touching is ignored if it is caused by a Team R player pushing or blocking a Team K player into contact with ball (6-1-7, 6-2-5);
- If Team R is first to touch a free kick, Team K may catch or recover the ball and retain possession;
- Team K may retain possession of a free kick after it goes 10 yards and touches the ground;
- The ball is always dead when Team K gains possession of a kick;
- On free kicks, it is kick-catching interference if Team K touches the ball in flight;
- If Team R is first to touch a scrimmage kick beyond the neutral zone, Team K may catch or recover the ball and retain possession;

- If a scrimmage kick is behind the neutral zone, Team K may catch or recover the ball and advance;
- If a scrimmage kick is beyond the neutral zone when Team K gains possession, the ball is dead;
- On scrimmage kicks, it is kick-catching interference if Team K touches the ball in flight or obstructs Team R when a Team R player is in position to make a catch;
- The touching of a low scrimmage kick by any player is ignored if the touching is in or behind the expanded neutral zone (6-2-6);
- The touching of a scrimmage kick or a free kick within the neutral zone is ignored if it is caused by a Team K player pushing or blocking a Team R player into contact with ball (6-1-6, 6-2-4);
- A Team K player may bat a grounded scrimmage kick which is beyond the neutral zone toward his own goal line;
- A Team K player may catch or bat a scrimmage kick in flight beyond the neutral zone toward his own goal line if no Team R player is in position to catch the ball; and
- If any kick strikes an official who is inbounds, the status of the ball is unchanged. It is not the same as the ball touching the ground where the official is standing. If the ball is in flight when it strikes the official, it continues to be in flight until the ball physically touches the ground.

Opportunity to Catch a Kick

The opportunity to catch a kick applies whether or not a fair catch signal is given. As previously discussed (see the sections on “Opportunity to Catch a Free Kick” and “Opportunity to Catch a Scrimmage Kick”), the opportunity of the receiving team to catch a kick applies to both free and scrimmage kicks. Again, these rules are the same except for one difference. On a scrimmage kick, the kicking team may touch or catch the ball if no receiver is in position to catch it. On a free kick, it is a foul if the kicking team is the first to touch the ball while it is in-flight.

If there is a foul for interference. Team R may: