

2021 Rule Changes

Summary and Commentary by Eric D. Zemper

The following summarizes the major track and field rule changes for this year that are most directly relevant to the working official. There are many additional changes not noted here that are of a more administrative nature, are editorial changes, or are reorganization of specific rules. If you work as a referee, you are advised to review all the rule changes in the relevant rule books. Complete information on all rule changes can be found in the 2021 editions of each rule book. (*Editor's comments are in italics and enclosed in parentheses.*)

National Federation (High School) Rule Changes for 2021

(Since the world Covid pandemic caused the cancellation of the high school track season across the country, the NFHS decided to carry the 2020 rules over to the 2021-2022 rule book. Therefore, there were no new high school rules for 2021. As a reminder, listed below are the new rules that will go into effect in 2021 and would have gone into effect if there had been a season in 2020.)

- Rules 4-6-5g, 8-6-1e – Adds language to clarify that a competitor should not be penalized for helping another competitor who is distressed or injured when no advantage is gained by doing so. (*As long as no advantage is gained, a competitor should not be penalized for showing good sportsmanship.*)
- Rules 5-3-3&4, 5-10-6 thru 11 – Add language to extend the exchange zone for the 4x100m and 4x200m relays (and any other relays with legs of 200m or less) to 30 meters. (All other relay exchange zones, such as 4x400m and 4x800m, shall remain at 20 meters in length.) (*This brings the high school rules in line with the recent change in all the other rule books. The 10 meter extension will be at the beginning of the exchange zone; the end of the exchange zone will remain in the same place as before. The beginning of the 30m exchange zone is simply where the marker [usually a small triangle] is for the old acceleration zone for sprint relay legs. If the new marks have not been put in place this spring, just point out to the athletes and umpires that the old acceleration mark is now the beginning of the exchange zone, or place a piece of athletic tape the width of the lane over the triangles marking the beginning of each acceleration zone. Again, this applies only to the 4x100m and 4x200m relays; the exchange zones for the 4x400m and 4x800m relays remain the same as they always have been.*)
- Rule 6-2-6 – Adds language to state that it is illegal to run backward or in the opposite direction on a horizontal jump, pole vault or javelin runway. (*This rule was meant to relate specifically to the warm-up period, where athletes often run backward down the runway to help establish their steps. Presumably this is being done for safety reasons, to eliminate potential collisions of athletes moving in opposite directions on the runway. However, the current wording in the rule book could be interpreted to apply during the competition as well, thus not allowing an athlete to abort an attempt and run or jog back on the runway to restart the attempt. This should not be the interpretation, since during an attempt the runway belongs to the athlete and no one else should be on it to cause a safety hazard. A clarification is being requested from NFHS.*)
- Rule 6-3-2-b-4-a – Modifies language regarding jump-offs in vertical jumps to add metric equivalents for the raising or lowering of the bar. (*Along with 2019 change to allow metric measurements in the long throws, another move toward using metric measurements, like everyone else.*)
- Rule 5-11-1 – Editorial change: “A relay team shall pass their baton in accordance with the rules.” (*The old rule said “shall pass the baton”. By changing “the” to “their”, it clarifies that each team must finish the race with the same baton with which they started the race. This is an interesting clarification, since the NCAA and USATF rule books have been silent on the issue of finishing a relay with the same baton that you started with. This becomes more of a noticeable issue with the advent of chipped batons. In the 2019 Big Ten indoor meet there was a three team tumble in the first leg of the distance medley relay, and one team dropped out and the two others finished. The batons were chipped and, as referee, after the race I was told that one team finished with the baton of the team that had dropped out. Quickly checking the rule book, I found the NCAA rules only require each team to finish with “a” baton, not necessarily their own baton. Presumably this issue will be addressed by the NCAA rules committee. The IAAF has had a rule since 2017 requiring a team to finish with baton it started with, and the USATF rule book added this rule in 2020.*)

NCAA Rule Changes for 2021-2022 Rulebook

This was a rule change year for the NCAA, so there are a few major changes for college meets. An important thing you need to be aware of is that the NCAA has not changed the field event time limits back to one minute, as World Athletics (WA, formerly the IAAF) and the USATF did a couple of years ago. The NCAA apparently is content to remain as the only rule book to keep the 30 second limit for all field events except the pole vault, which remains one minute.

- Rule 3-19.3 – Places the decision regarding return of an injured athlete to competition solely in the hands of the appointed or approved physician or athletic trainer for the competition. Such medical decisions are without appeal. (*The NCAA feels this should not be the responsibility of the referee, whose decisions are appealable, but should rest solely with a medical professional.*)
- Rule 4-2.2.e – Time schedule changes preventing a competitor from fulfilling their obligations to compete in a second event is not considered a failure to participate. (*Unforeseen, last minute event schedule changes should not automatically lead to penalizing a competitor who, as a result of that change, cannot reasonably compete in a second event they have been entered in. This gives the referee some flexibility in addressing such issues.*)
- Rule 4-2.4.b – Athletes are now allowed to view (outside the competition area) video images of their previous attempts recorded by individuals not in the competition area. Viewing devices cannot be taken into the competition area. A Note with this new rule specifies that Meet Management shall identify an area for viewing video that does not interfere with the ongoing competition. (*The NCAA now joins the NFHS, USATF and WA in allowing athletes to view video images under controlled conditions during the competition. The stated purpose of this new rule and the Note are to provide consistent access for all athletes, ensuring they will be allowed to cross the track to converse with their coaches and view video.*)
- Rule 4-3.3 – Commemorative or memorial patches are allowed on uniforms, as long as they are identical for all team members, no greater than 2 ¼ square inches, and create no safety hazard.
- Rule 4-3.4.c – In all jumping events, competitors are allowed to wear bib numbers on either the back or the front.
- Rule 5-10.7.j – Increases the number of allowable competitors from 16 to 20 for the indoor 3Km. (*This will allow games committees/meet management more flexibility in setting up heats.*)
- Rule 6-1.8.g – Warm-ups in all jumping events and the javelin throw shall be run only in the direction the events will be conducted. (*This is similar to the new high school rule noted above, but it is worded to specifically apply to warm-ups. As noted in the next section, USATF also has adopted this rule for Youth and JO competitions.*)
- Rule 6-1.14 – New language clarifies procedures for taking measurements in the throws and horizontal jumps: Measure each valid attempt immediately; if an oral protest is made, measure and record on a separate sheet until the protest is resolved; and preserve the mark in the landing area until removal is authorized by the chief judge. (*This essentially adopts best practices that have been in the USATF rule book for some time.*)
- Rule 6-1.19 – Requires an official to be present to monitor warm-ups in all field events in indoor and outdoor competitions. (*The previous language for this rule only recommended this; now it is a requirement. NFHS has had a similar rule for several years, and the USATF has adopted a similar rule for Youth/JO competitions.*)
- Rule 6-4.3 – To provide more flexibility, when the number of pole vault or high jumper competitors exceeds 25 (rather than the former limit of 20) the games committee shall select one of the options from a list that now starts with “Proceed using one continuous flight”. (*Using one continuous flight is listed first since it is the most preferred option. It is followed by using a qualifying competition, then by using two or more flights, and then (the least preferred option) using a rotating flight or five-alive.*)
- Rule 6-6.2 – A new rule now defines a legal jump in the pole vault as being one in which the competitor takes off by planting the pole in the vaulting box. (*Although it is true that a formal definition of a legal vault has not been in any rule book, this is probably the case since it was never considered to be necessary. Personally, at the normal heights of the bar in collegiate pole vault competitions, I have a hard time envisioning how anyone would attempt to clear them without planting the pole in the vaulting box.*)

- Rule 6-7.3.c – Clarifies that in the long jump and triple jump, it shall be a foul if, in attempting a jump, the competitor takes off outside of the runway, whether beyond or before the board. (*However, jumps where the foot/shoe is partially on and partially off the side of the board and behind the scratch line are still legal.*)
- Rule 6-8.2.c, 6-9.2.c, 6-11.2.b – Revises rules regarding foul throws in the shot put, discuss throw, hammer and weight throw. It shall be a foul if, after entering the circle and starting the throw or put, the competitor touches with any part of the body, before the implement hits the ground:
 - 1) in the front half of the circle, any surface area outside of the circle's metal band, except the inside surface;
 - 2) in the back half of the circle, any surface area outside of the top of the circle's metal band;
 - 3) shot put only: any surface outside the top of the stopboard except its inside surface.

(The NCAA apparently felt the current rule is subjective and inconsistently called by officials, so they've tried to create something more objective for calling foot fouls, particularly in the back half of the circle. I have received from NCAA Rules Editor Mark Kostek confirmation of an interpretation of #2: the wording does allow for the sole of the shoe to at least brush the top of the metal band in the back half of the circle, as long as it doesn't touch the surface outside the band. This brings the NCAA rule more in line with current USATF and WA rules.)

USATF Rule Changes for 2021

At the 2020 USATF annual meetings held in the virtual world because of the Covid pandemic, this past December the Rules Committee considered 80 rule changes. Forty-five of them were accepted as submitted, 8 were accepted with further amendments, 6 were tabled until next year, 6 were withdrawn, and 5 were rejected. Many of them were minor changes in wording for clarification purposes, but many were more substantive. Among the rule changes of most immediate concern to working officials are the following:

- Amend Rule 143.3(e) regarding shoe requirements – *(USATF is staying in conformance with recent WA rule changes regarding sole thickness of competitors' shoes. There are exceptions listed for US Youth and Masters. It is not anticipated that Call Room officials will have to begin measuring sole thickness; the WA intends to publish a list of shoes that meet requirements.)*
- Amend Rule 162.12 regarding commencement of the start – add new Note and renumber current notes “Note 1: An athlete must react to the start signal, not anticipate it; therefore, any start where the Start Information System detects movement before the expiration of the limit established in Rule 161.6 or Rule 162.14 shall be recalled, and an assessment made regarding ‘commencement of the start’. *(This provides additional clarification by explicitly stating for the first time in the rules that anticipating the gun, or trying to outguess the starter, is illegal. It also further clarifies that, if the SIS detects movement before the 0.100 second time limit, the race must be recalled even though there may not have been a visually detectable movement before the gun, and a full assessment by the start team as to whether or not there was a commencement of the start before the time limit. This assessment would include visual evidence, video evidence, SIS readouts and waveforms, and assessment of whether or not the SIS was operating properly.)*
- Amend Rule 162.12(a) regarding definition of commencement of a start involving loss of contact with the ground by the hands – add “Note: An athlete signaling to abort the start (see Rule 162.17a) is excluded from this definition.” *(This clarifies that an athlete signaling to abort the start by raising a hand is not to be charged with a false start under Rule 162.12(a).)*
- Amend Rule 162.17(b) regarding improper conduct situations at the start line – an athlete may be charged with improper conduct who “...fails to comply with the provisions of the command “on your marks” or “set” as appropriate, does not attain a full and final starting position at once and without delay, or requires a warning on any provision of Rule 162...”. *(To be consistent with the wording of Rule 162.9, the phrase “after a reasonable time” has been replaced with “at once and without delay”, thus indicating that the athlete doesn’t get to decide what is a reasonable time, but is to respond to the starter’s commands immediately.)*
- Amend Rule 180.12(a) regarding time allowed for field event trials – add language “...If the competitor wishes to make further adjustments of the uprights, or wishes to establish or change markers allowed in Rule 180.23, it should be done during the applicable time limit.” and add “Note 3: The Referee may determine that factors independent of the competitor’s own action (e.g., marks removed or weather issues) exist to justify awarding additional time.”

(The additional phrase to the body of Rule 180.12 clarifies that, in addition to adjustments to the uprights, once the clock starts for an attempt, any adjustments to the athlete's runway markers must be done during the one minute time limit. The added Note gives the referee flexibility to consider factors out of the athlete's control in considering requests for awarding additional time.)

- Amend Rule 181.19 regarding pole vault plant box – “...the side of the landing area nearest the box...shall slope away from the box at an angle of 30 to 45 degrees.” *(Increasing this angle to 45 degrees will allow longer poles to bend more freely during the attempt. This change still allows current landing pads with the 30 degree angle to be used, but newly purchased landing pads should have the 45 degree angle.)*
- Amend Rule 184.2-5 – Eliminates the requirement for the use of plasticine indicator boards in the horizontal jumps, instead recommending the use of video technology to assist the board judge. If video assistance is not available, the plasticine indicator board may still be used. If the plasticine indicator board is used, the plasticine shall be at an angle of 90 degrees (instead of the current 45 degrees). This rule change will go into effect on November 1, 2021. *(World Athletics, and thus USATF, is moving away from the use of plasticine as the sole indicator of a foot foul in the horizontal jumps. As noted in the following rule change, they are moving to using the plane of the edge of the take-off board in defining a fair jump, rather than a mark in the plasticine.)*
- Amend Rule 185.5(a) regarding fouls in the horizontal jumps – “While taking off, breaks the vertical plane of the take-off line with any part of his or her foot or shoe, whether running up without jumping or in the act of jumping...”. This rule change will go into effect on November 1, 2021. *(This change eliminates the problem the IAAF/WA has had for years with the advent of small television cameras placed to view the take-off board showing toes of shoes clearly ‘breaking the plane’ yet the officials having to call a fair jump because the shoe didn’t make a mark in the plasticine. It brings the rest of the world into line with the way we’ve always done this in high school and college. The IAAF rule book, ever since the first edition in 1914, has required that there be 4 inches of soft dirt or sand ¼ inch deep placed just beyond the scratch line to act as an indicator for fouled attempts. By mid-century the use of plasticine became the preferred material. US collegiate and high school rules from early in the 20th century never required the use of any material as a foul indicator, it was strictly visual breaking of the plane. Again, this rule change will not go into effect until November 1, 2021, after the Olympic Games.)*
- Amend Rule 187.1(a) regarding throws from a circle and the required pause before initiating the attempt – change the word “within” to “inside” (the circle); add “Note: The intent of the rule is to negate competitor advantage or momentum from a motion that began outside the circle. There is no restriction on how, or from which direction, an athlete may enter the circle. The relevant requirement is that once inside they must adopt a stationary position before commencing their trial. Entry from the front half of the circle, or making contact with the stop board, before establishing a position at the rear of the circle generally satisfies the condition of being stationary. All that is needed is a momentary stop or pause inside the circle before starting the throw.” *(Further clarification regarding the requirement for a momentary pause before beginning the throws attempt. All that is required is a detectable stop or pause in motion inside the circle before beginning the final throwing action.)*
- Amend Rule 187.13 Note regarding implement inspections – delete the sentence “When personal implements are being accepted, it is recommended that an athlete not submit more than three implements per event for certification.” *(Deleting this sentence eliminates a conflict with Rule 187.10 that states a two implement limit. Games committees can still set a different limit if they choose.)*
- Amend Rule 193.1 regarding legal attempts in the javelin throw – reorganization of the rule, plus add to 193.1 (c) “Note: This rule is intended to avoid rotation as part of the throwing motion or as part of the run-up. This rule does not prevent a competitor who has interrupted an attempt and walks back to initiate another attempt.” *(A reorganization of the first three paragraphs of Rule 193.1 that does not change the rule, but does add some clarity, plus the addition of the Note specifying that the rule against turning the back to the sector during the attempt does not apply when the athlete aborts an attempt and turns to go back and reset for another attempt.)*
- Add Rule 262.3(d) regarding records – “Records may be set in ‘virtual’ field events involving individuals competing against each other from physically distant locations provided that the location at which the record-setting performance occurs meets all record requirements.” *(An interesting response to the Covid pandemic, which*

(has resulted in a number of ‘virtual competitions’ with athletes competing in different venues in different cities, an approach that may continue in the future.)

- Amend Rule 300.1(e) – add “Note: When, as determined by the Referee, there is an insufficient number of competitors reporting within an age group for a track event, such that separate races eliminates the element of competition, a mixed age group race of the same gender may be authorized. The finish order within each age group shall be separate for all scoring and awards.” *(Allows combining age groups, but not boys and girls, in Youth and Junior Olympic competitions when numbers of competitors in an age group are too small to provide reasonable competition. Results will still be separated by age group.)*
- Amend Rule 302.5(g) regarding privately owned implements and the loss-of-identity rule exemption in Youth competitions – replace “javelins” with “implements”. *(In other words, in Youth and JO competitions, no privately owned implement is subject to the loss-of-identity rule found in Rule 187.10.)*
- Amend Rule 302.5(j) regarding Youth athlete assistance in the vertical jumps – add “Note: At all levels of competition, the individual providing assistance shall have a field-of-play credential issued by meet management. This assistance and ‘start of competition’ shall be flight specific.” *(This amendment also clarifies that the rule applies to all age divisions, and sets parameters for who can be at the venue to assist Youth/JO athletes.)*
- Amend Rule 302.5(p) regarding athletes who are excused from vertical jumps to compete in another event – add the following sentence to the rule: “If the competitor has failed to return and the competition has otherwise concluded, the judge shall automatically pass the excused competitor and only raise the bar once to the next height before using the forfeiting procedure in Rule 181.6.” *(Specifies action to be taken by the official when an excused athlete has failed to return when all other competitors have completed their competition.)*
- Amend Rule 302.5(q) regarding excused absences from an event – delete from the first sentence “, no time limit shall be imposed on the excused competitor, except that”. *(Deleting this phrase from the rule is meant to eliminate the problem of coaches not reading beyond ‘no time limit will be imposed’ and falsely assuming no time limits of any kind and thereby causing their athletes to miss attempts.)*
- Amend Rule 302.5(r) regarding warm-ups in vertical jumps for athletes who have passed heights – delete the Note and amend the rule to read: “In the High Jump and Pole Vault, each competitor who has not taken an initial trial in at least one hour from the time of the first trial of the event competition, shall be permitted no more than two run-throughs within a minute and a half in the high jump or two minutes in the pole vault. Such run-throughs shall be taken at a height change under the direction of the event official without a crossbar or bungee in place. The competitor using this provision shall make at least one attempt at this height.” *(Youth now go to a one hour criterion for awarding warm-up run-throughs to vertical jumpers who pass heights at the beginning of an event, rather than using the old three consecutive heights criterion.)*
- Add new Rule 302.5(t) – “Warm-ups at the event venue shall not be allowed unless supervised by an event official and the event venue has been declared open by the Chief Event official with direction from the Meet Director. Warm-up approaches in the long jump, triple jump, javelin and pole vault may only be taken in the direction in which the event is contested. Running in the opposite direction either on or adjacent to the runway is forbidden.” *(This requirement applies to Youth/JO competitions and is similar to two recent rule changes in high school rules, and also is a requirement in the NCAA rules starting this year.)*
- Amend Rule 302.6 regarding vertical jumps in Youth Combined Events – delete the second sentence of the rule and replace with “The additional warm-up provisions of Rule 302.5(r) shall apply.” *(This is a reminder that the one hour criterion of the new Rule 302.5(r), rather than three consecutive heights, applies to Youth Combined Events as well.)*
- Amend Rule 303.1(c) regarding start of the 800M and 4x800M relay when there are more than 8 competitors – add new language to the end of the third sentence so that it now reads: “When the number of competitors exceeds the number of lanes, the excess competitors shall share the even-numbered lanes starting from lane 8 and working into lane 2 (Hip number 9 is placed in lane 8; Hip 10 is placed in lane 6; Hip 11 is placed in lane 4 and hip 12 is placed in lane 2).” *(The new language in the parentheses specifies how the additional competitors will be placed at the starting lines.)*

- Amend Rule 320 regarding Masters competitions – (*The USATF Masters Track and Field Committee has now decided to extend the age groups covered in Masters track and field to include those who are 25 to 29 years old.*)

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