



New Process for Distributing Cards Among 13 Changes in High School Soccer Rules

BY NFHS ON MARCH 16, 2026 | NFHS NEWS, PRESS RELEASE, SOCCER STORY

Several rules updates were approved in high school soccer for next school year, including new guidance on carding, penalty kick encroachment, a longer time limit for goalkeepers to release the ball, and additional clarifications on equipment and electronic devices.

These changes were among 13 rules proposals recommended by the NFHS Soccer Rules Committee at its February 9-11 meeting in Indianapolis and subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

“This year’s updates represent another exciting step in our ongoing effort to modernize the NFHS Soccer Rules Book,” said Julie Cochran, NFHS director of sports and liaison to the Soccer Rules Committee. “With major rewrites to Rules 13 and 14, we’ve made significant progress in creating a resource that is clearer, more intuitive, and easier for coaches, players and officials to use. These aren’t just rule changes; they’re part of a broader commitment to building a rules book that truly serves the high school game. We look forward to continuing this work in the years ahead.”

Changes to Rule **5-3-1 f-j** concern a new process for distributing yellow cards and red cards. Amended language states that officials shall hold a yellow or red card and indicate the substitute, coach or bench personnel being cautioned. If there’s an ejection, and the reason was receiving a second caution in the same game, the referee shall show a yellow card indicating the subsequent caution followed immediately by showing a red card. The referee must then direct any player shown a yellow or red card to leave the field of play.

Additionally, the official must “notify both coaches, the scorer, and other official(s) of the nature of the misconduct after showing a yellow or red card to a player, coach or bench personnel.”

Language was added to **Rule 8-1-2** clarifying that all players, except the player taking the kickoff, must be on their half of the field or the kickoff shall be retaken. In addition, an indirect free kick is awarded to the opponent if the offensive player who took the kickoff

touches the ball after the kick before it is played or touched by another player on either team.

Language in Rule **12-1-2c** regarding conditional free kick fouls, was revised to state that “A player shall not charge into, or challenge, an opposing goalkeeper who is controlling the ball with their hands as in 12-3-2a. Outside the penalty area, the goalkeeper has no more privileges than any other player.”

The change aligns the rule with consistent officiating practice, removes redundancies and improves clarity without materially altering when a charge is or is not permitted.

Goalkeeper restrictions were also updated, which affects several rules. Starting next school year, goalkeepers will have eight seconds instead of six before releasing the ball. Under the new rules, a corner kick will be awarded if the goalkeeper holds the ball past eight seconds instead of an indirect free kick.

Under Rule **12-2-3**, “biting” was incorporated into direct free kick fouls. The rule now states a player shall not spit at or bite anyone listed on a roster or a game official, or a direct free kick foul will be awarded.

In addition, Rules **12-3-6** and **12-3-7** were added to include verbal offenses. By including “other verbal offenses” as an indirect free kick foul, it gives officials more flexibility when disciplining verbal offenses: they are now considered fouls at a minimum and may rise to the level of misconduct depending on the circumstances.

Under changes to Rule **12-3-5** regarding indirect free kicks, clarifying language was added to considerations for dangerous play that include actions preventing a nearby opponent from playing the ball for fear of injury.

Changes were also made to Rule **12-6-1** regarding ejections. The revisions clarify and simplify language surrounding Denying an Obvious Goal Scoring Opportunity (DOGSO) ejections by removing redundant wording, eliminating references to “attempted” DOGSO — since intent is not part of the decision — and aligning with previous wording within Rule 12. The updated structure provides clear situations for which denying a goal or obvious goal-scoring opportunity is penalized with an ejection.

Revisions to Rule **13-1 through 13-3** clarify procedures for restarts on free kicks by breaking the rule into distinct categories, outlining when and where free kicks are awarded, and detailing how they are to be taken. It also specifies the correct restart locations and provides guidance for officials on managing these situations. The update incorporates restart procedures for scenarios involving outside agents, offenses occurring off the field, thrown objects, individuals entering the field illegally, players leaving the field without permission, and offenses that occur outside the field of play.

Rule 14 regarding penalty kicks will have changes to ensure that encroachment is penalized only if the offense has a clear impact on the penalty kick.

Goalkeepers will now receive a warning for a first offense rather than an immediate caution, acknowledging that such infractions often stem from mis-anticipation. Regarding the kicker on a penalty kick, the revisions continue to allow deceptive movements and stutter-stepping during the run-up; however, the change strictly prohibits feinting once the approach to the ball is completed.

Finally, in rare instances where both the kicker and goalkeeper offend simultaneously during a penalty kick, the kicker is penalized, as the kicker's illegal feinting is typically the catalyst for the goalkeeper's infraction. The penalty chart is also updated and reformatted for clarity.

"These revisions to the penalty kick rule better reflect the spirit of the game," said Gibby Reynolds, NFHS Soccer Rules Committee chair. "As arbiters of the game, officials now can apply judgment and only penalize offenses, like encroachment, when there is an impact."

Clarifications for uniform and equipment rules were also a part of the changes. In Rule **4-1-4c**, the word "dark" was added to clarify that the home team must wear socks that contrast with the away team's solid white socks. In Rule **4-2-7**, subsections 'd' and 'e' were added to clarify that mouth protectors, if worn by players, should not serve any function other than to protect the teeth or mouth.

Additions were also made to Rule **4-2-11 a-c**, stating that no athlete participating in a match is permitted to wear any type of audio or video device to record, transmit or livestream, aligning with other NFHS rules books. State associations may further restrict electronic devices.