



UNDER
THE
STRIPES

FOOTBALL

RULES REFERENCE

HIGH SCHOOL OFFICIALS QUICK GUIDE
2026 NFHS TACKLE FOOTBALL

CODE & GENDER APPLICATION

NFHS tackle-football rules are not gender-specific. Flag football uses a separate code.

Study aid only. Always use the current official rulebook, interpretations, mechanics manual, state or conference adoptions, bulletins and assignment instructions.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE CALLS

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UNDER THE STRIPES NETWORK | VERIFIED JULY 23, 2026

Core Contest Framework

Start here before moving into situation-specific study.

Topic	Quick reference
Players / game	11 players per team; four 12-minute periods. State associations control overtime and may adopt running-clock provisions.
Field	360 x 160 feet, including two 10-yard end zones; goal lines 100 yards apart.
Series	Four downs to gain 10 yards; line to gain established when a new series is awarded.
Timing	Know ready-for-play vs snap starts, accepted-penalty timing, first-down timing, incomplete passes, out-of-bounds plays and final-minute provisions.
Free kick	Kicking team restraining line normally its 40-yard line; receivers' normally the 50. Confirm field and state modifications.
Scoring	Touchdown 6; field goal 3; safety 2; try 1 by kick or 2 by touchdown.

Pregame Crew Checklist

- Confirm jurisdiction, start time, contest level, crew assignments and state/local modifications.
- Inspect playing area, equipment, clocks, team/bench areas and required game personnel.
- Conduct the required coaches/captains meeting; address sportsmanship and unusual ground/facility conditions.
- Review timing, substitution, timeout, penalty and end-of-period/inning procedures.
- Establish crew communication, primary coverage, rotations, help situations and emergency procedures.

Primary Coverage & Mechanics

Use the current NFHS officials manual and your state mechanics. Maintain a patient whistle/flag, officiate your primary, expand only when necessary, and communicate decisive information to the crew before enforcement.

High-Priority Rules

Area	What the official must know
Player safety	Targeting, illegal helmet contact, defenseless players, blindside blocks, horse-collar tackles and unnecessary contact require disciplined crew coverage.
Head contact	The 2026 prohibition on striking/slapping an opponent's head applies to all players, not only blockers.
Play cards	2026 permits approved play cards on forearm/wrist and belt areas; verify they do not create a safety issue.
Forward progress	Kill the play when runner progress is stopped; protect the runner and clean up after the whistle.
Pass eligibility	Determine numbering, position at the snap, covered/uncovered status, touching and whether a pass crossed the neutral zone.
Penalty enforcement	Identify live/dead-ball status, basic spot, all-but-one, succeeding spot, half-distance and loss-of-down/automatic-first-down consequences.

Gender & Competition Differences

Area	Application
Tackle football	Same NFHS rules for all participants; equipment must fit and meet certification requirements.
Flag football	Separate NFHS code: typically 7-player, smaller field, flags and non-contact restrictions. Do not apply tackle-football rules.
State offerings	Some states sponsor girls flag, girls tackle, or both. Confirm the assignment and rule code before arrival.

Important

A boys/girls distinction is included only where an actual equipment, dimension, adoption or competition difference exists. The absence of a separate section means the same NFHS playing rule applies.

Situations to Review

Situation	Crew response / study point
Runner's progress stopped, then ball comes loose	If the whistle/progress ruling ended the down first, the subsequent loose ball is dead.
Two fouls during the same down	Record each foul completely, determine whether they offset or whether a choice is available, then enforce in proper order.
Potential targeting	Crew member with the best view reports the act, point of contact and defenseless status; apply the NFHS definition, not a college replay standard.
Clock status uncertain	Communicate the ruling and next clock status before ready-for-play; correct an obvious timing error using rule-authorized information.

Postgame Self-Review

- Which ruling required the strongest rules knowledge?
- Did the crew communicate ball status, clock status, penalty/foul details and restart correctly?
- Was any call made outside a primary without clear necessity?
- What rule, case play or mechanic should be verified before the next assignment?
- What one crew adjustment would improve consistency?

Official References

NFHS Football Rules

<https://nfhs.org/sports/football/rules>

2026 Rules Changes

<https://nfhs.org/stories/prohibition-on-slapping-the-head-now-applies-to-all-players-in-high-school-football>

NFHS Flag Football Rules

<https://nfhs.org/sports/flag-football/rules>

RULES DISCLAIMER

This educational quick reference is not an official rules book and does not reproduce the complete NFHS code. Rules, interpretations and state adoptions change. Before every season and assignment, consult the current NFHS rules book, case book, officials manual, your state high school association and the contest administrator.