2025 Football Points Of Emphasis

ILLEGAL AND IMPROPERLY WORN PLAYER EQUIPMENT

In high school football, players must adhere to specific equipment standards for safety and fairness concerns. Illegal equipment refers to items that are prohibited such as: jewelry; tinted visors; non-compliant eye shade; bands worn around the upper arm, neck or legs; back pads not covered; and sweatbands and uniform adornments, including towels, that do not conform to the rules.

On the other hand, improperly worn equipment pertains to all equipment that is otherwise legal but not worn as intended. Examples include pants not covering the knees as required, tooth and mouth protectors not being worn as play starts, and shoulder pads not properly covered by the jersey. Incorrectly wearing these items can diminish their protective effectiveness and potentially endanger players.

Despite the lack of enforcement at the college level, the NFHS is proud of the work high school players, coaches, and game officials have done to properly enforce all rules that reduce the risk of injury. The rules and regulations governing high school football are designed to reduce the injury risk of players while maintaining the integrity and fairness of the game. These rules, often overlooked by casual spectators, play a crucial role in protecting the athletes and preserving the uniformity of team's appearance. Despite the negative influences by levels of play beyond high school, coaches and game officials must remain vigilant with enforcement of the equipment rules currently in place at the high school level.

Non-compliance with these rules can result in various penalties, ranging from removal of a player for one play for improperly worn equipment, to an unsportsmanlike penalty on the head coach when players are illegally equipped following the pre-game certification.

Chronic violations of the rule for properly worn equipment can significantly impact the game's fairness and safety. Repeated offenses not only jeopardize the individual player's well-being but also negatively impact the pace of the game, and fairness to the opposing team. When players persistently disregard the equipment guidelines, there are several administrative options within current NFHS rules:

• A delay-of-game penalty would be a logical consequence for persistent offenses that significantly impact the pace of play.

• Chronic violations of equipment rules by players could result in an unsportsmanlike conduct foul being assessed under Rule 1-5-3c(9) and 9-8-1h, for equipment not worn as intended by the manufacturer.

• Finally, a coach who demonstrates a lack of interest in supporting these important rules of our sport could be easily judged to be acting in an unsportsmanlike manner.

Coaches play a pivotal role in addressing chronic violations of equipment rules. They must instill the importance of proper equipment use through consistent reinforcement and education. Additionally, fostering an environment where players hold each other accountable can help minimize infractions. Game officials must also remain vigilant and enforce penalties consistently to deter chronic violations. Issuing temporary removals from the game and escalating penalties for repeated offenses are necessary measures to uphold the integrity of the game.

The high school football player equipment rules are a testament to the sport's commitment to player safety and team unity. This unity extends beyond aesthetics; it reinforces the idea that each player is part of a larger whole, working together toward a common goal. A team's integrity is maintained when no player stands out for the wrong reason. While it may seem like a minor detail, these regulations play a significant role in reducing injury and maintaining the integrity of the game.

SPORTSMANSHIP

Unsportsmanlike conduct is incompatible with the values of education-based athletics. As unsporting acts increase at the college and professional levels, all stakeholders must work together to ensure high school football embodies the highest principles of sportsmanship and fundamental ethics of competition.

The focus of high school football is on the team – not the individual. The "individual over team" emphasis is contrary to the mission of education-based sports.

High school football is a game of extreme emotion played by exceptionally talented teenagers. Game officials should not be overly technical in applying the rules, but they should always be aware of conduct that does not exemplify sportsmanship. In determining whether an action rises to the level of a foul, game officials should allow for brief, spontaneous, emotional reactions at the end of a play. However, game officials should penalize acts that are prolonged, choreographed, and directed at an opponent.

The following actions are unsportsmanlike conduct that should be penalized without warning: demonstrations of violence such as brandishing guns and throat slashes, rehearsed poses, gestures with sexual connotation, dunking the ball over the crossbar, removal of helmet to celebrate or protest, dancing, somersaults or flips, and spiking or spinning the ball. Any act that is clearly intended to taunt, demean or show disrespect to an opponent or the game should be penalized.

The actions noted above are unsporting and contrary to the values of education-based athletics. The focus must remain on student-athletes, the values of team success, celebrating victory with class, and enduring loss with dignity.

DEFENSELESS PLAYER/TARGETING

A defenseless player is a player who, because of physical position and focus of concentration, is especially vulnerable to injury. The player remains defenseless until the player's physical position and focus of concentration allows the player to have a chance to protect themselves or brace, at least partially, for contact.

The most common types of defenseless players include passers, receivers, sliding runners, runners whose forward progress is stopped, players out of the play and players who are illegally blocked from the blindside. For added defenseless player clarifications, please refer to 2.32.16 COMMENT and CHART in the 2025 NFHS Football Case Book.

A player is defenseless based on the player's own position and concentration. It is not determined by another player's actions. When the wrap-up tackle was added to the definition of defenseless player as it relates to contact on a defenseless receiver, it created confusion because this highlighted action by another player. Thus, the forceful contact against a defenseless receiver portion of Rule 2 (definitions) has been relocated to Rule 9 (conduct of players/penalty). By moving the wrap-up tackle portion of the defenseless player guidelines to Rule 9, it clearly limits the contact to a defenseless offensive or defensive receiver, to incidental contact that is a result of making a play on the ball, contact initiated with open hands, or an attempt to tackle by wrapping arm(s) around the receiver.

A major focus of the NFHS Football Rules Committee is to promote uniform enforcement of illegal contact on defenseless players across the country. We urge all coaches and game officials to study the rules, watch and share video, and have discussions with one another about what constitutes legal and illegal contact. Furthermore, a review of targeting provisions is crucial for minimizing risk for all players.

It is imperative that players clearly comprehend what contact is acceptable and be able to recognize when an opponent is considered defenseless. Players must realize that the responsibility for making legal contact resides with the person initiating the contact.

Game officials must demonstrate a broad awareness of what contact is necessary to make a legal block or tackle and contact considered excessive and, in some cases, flagrant. Forceful contact that is avoidable should not be tolerated by coaches or officials. When in doubt, game officials should throw a flag for illegal personal contact and should be supported in doing so.

The long-term success of high school football is linked to risk minimization. Coaches, game officials, players and administrators share the responsibility to eliminate targeting and illegal contact against defenseless players from our great game.