

Soccer Rules of Emphasis and Rules Changes 2026

Rules of Emphasis 2026

Properly Marked Fields

Administrators, coaches, and officials must prioritize the proper marking of team areas and the maintenance of the 10-foot buffer around the field's boundary lines to ensure a safe and professional environment for student-athletes. The Soccer Field Diagram in Rule 1 requires a minimum of 10 feet of space beyond the field boundary lines for spectators, fencing, or any objects. Any safety concerns should be identified by officials and brought to the attention of administrators or coaches for remediation.

Team areas extend 10 yards from each side of the halfway line for a total length of 20 yards and set back 10 feet from the touchline. On multi-use fields, football lines can provide a visual landmark: team areas extend from the 40-yard line to the 20-yard line. By rule, team areas must be clearly designated and marked by a solid line. Defining these spaces is essential for maintaining bench decorum, as all coaches and bench personnel are required to remain within these restricted areas during the contest. Properly marked areas allow officials to effectively manage the sidelines and ensure that personnel do not interfere with the game or the activities of the officiating crew. When conducting pre-game safety inspections, officials should identify any missing team-area markings and work with administrators or coaches to place cones as temporary boundaries. Any violations of Rule 1-5-3 must be reported to the state association.

Shared Professionalism and Bench Accountability

High school soccer serves as an extension of the classroom, requiring both officials and coaches to uphold the highest standards of composure and integrity. As adult leaders in education-based environment, everyone involved must contribute to a calm, respectful atmosphere that prioritizes student athletes. Professional communication should remain non-threatening and conversational, as raising one's voice, displaying frustrations or acting in a provocative manner only escalates conflict and distracts from the educational mission of high school athletics. When all participants prioritize a calm, cool, and collected demeanor, they ensure the focus remains on the student-

athletes and maintain a respectful, professional, and safe environment for competition.

In situations involving misconduct, education-based principles require that interactions between coaches and officials remain brief, respectful and focused on facts. When a caution or ejection is issued, officials are trained to advise the head coach of the sanction using appropriate rulebook language, such as "unsporting conduct" or "dissent." Both parties share responsibility for ensuring communication remains professional. Officials must deliver information calmly and clearly and coaches must receive it without arguing, complaining or displaying unsporting dissent.

Any dissent or inappropriate conduct during these conversations should be addressed firmly and professionally by officials as maintaining order and respect is essential to the learning environment. Coaches are accountable for their behavior and must support the educational goals of high school athletics by modeling emotional control and sportsmanship. When both coaches and officials uphold these shared standards, the result is a safe, respectful and developmentally appropriate environment for student athletes.

Managing Goal Celebrations

Celebrating after scoring a goal is an integral part of the game of soccer. Reacting with joy is permissible provided it is not excessive and not accompanied by taunting. Officials should recognize that high school soccer is a players' game, and allowing student-athletes to celebrate success contributes to a positive educational environment. To this end, players are allowed to celebrate, and it is a reality that it takes some time to express emotions. Luckily, the clock is stopped after a goal and it also takes time for the defending team to regroup and collect themselves before their kick-off. Celebrations may include leaving the field momentarily, which is permissible so long as players make a prompt return to the playing field. Engaging in rehearsed or choreographed celebrations should be discouraged by officials. The line between allowable celebration and misconduct is crossed when a player or team prevents a timely restart by delaying excessively or by taunting their opponents or fans.

Illegal actions occur when celebrations become prolonged, excessive, or serve to focus attention upon the individual rather than the game. This is especially true if celebrating players ignore requests by the official to return to their half of the field. Any act that prohibits a timely restart is considered unsporting conduct and requires the official to intervene and issue a caution (yellow card). Examples include jumping over retention flagging or barriers, climbing perimeter fences, or removing one's jersey. Officials must stay

vigilant following a goal, observing players to ensure that no taunting or other provocative gestures occur that could create a serious situation. By using preventive officiating to discourage time-wasting and holding players accountable for delayed restarts, officials maintain the flow of the game and uphold the spirit of safe and fair competition.

Penalty Kick Offenses and the Concept of Impact

For the 2026-27 season, Rule 14 has been revised to clarify that encroachment during a penalty kick is only penalized if the offense has a clear impact on the play. For the defending team, impact occurs if an encroaching defender clearly distracts the kicker or if they play a rebounding ball or challenge an attacker to prevent a goal-scoring opportunity. For the attacking team, impact constitutes clearly distracting the goalkeeper or if an encroaching attacker plays the ball or challenges a defender to score or create a scoring chance. If players from either team enter the penalty area or arc early but have no effect on the kicker, goalkeeper, or the immediate play, officials should allow the result of the kick to stand without penalty. Officiating these offenses on a penalty kick requires officials to judge the consequence of the encroachment alongside the outcome of the kick. Encroachment by the defending team is never penalized if the goal is scored. If the kick is missed or saved and the defense encroached with impact, the kick is retaken. If the attacking team encroaches with impact and a goal is scored, the goal is disallowed and the kick is retaken; if they encroach with impact and miss, the restart is an indirect free kick for the defending team. Goalkeepers who encroach and impact the kicker or make a save shall receive a warning for the first offense in a game, with cautions reserved for subsequent infractions. While kickers are permitted stutter-steps and hesitation moves during their run-up, once the approach to the ball is complete, feinting to kick the ball is an act of unsporting conduct, that shall be cautioned and is enforced on the first and every subsequent occurrence.

Identification of the NFHS Authenticating Mark on Game Balls

The NFHS Authenticating Mark ensures easy identification of inflated and non-inflated balls used in interscholastic competitions for which the NFHS writes playing rules. All such balls are required to display the NFHS Authenticating Mark. The use of conforming equipment is essential to the integrity of contests played under the NFHS rules. This mark helps to promote a level playing field by ensuring consistency in the equipment being used. The mark allows for the development of more sophisticated standards in balls and

clearly communicates to administrators, coaches, and officials that these standards are being met.

Non-compliance with these requirements will be reported to the state association for potential penalties following the contest. Administrators and coaches play a pivotal role in making sure all inflated and non-inflated balls meet these specifications. They must instill the importance of proper equipment use through consistent reinforcement during the pre-competition certification meeting and throughout the season. Game officials must also remain vigilant and report any non-compliant balls to the state association office.

Rules Changes

4-1-4c: Clarifies that dark socks must be worn by the home team.

Rationale: The two teams must wear colors that distinguish them from each other. The addition of the word dark in the home team sock clarifies that only the visiting team may wear white socks.

4-2-7d,e (NEW): Offers guidance on appropriate tooth and mouth protector elements.

Rationale: The overall purpose and function of the tooth and mouth protector is to protect the teeth, the mouth, and lips if it has a lip guard. Items that are added or included on the tooth and mouth protector that do not serve a purpose or function in the protection of the teeth or mouth should not be allowed. Also, items that are a part of the tooth and mouth protector that are a health risk to the individual wearing it should not be allowed.

4-2-11a thru c NOTE 2 (NEW): Prohibits players from wearing audio or video devices while participating in a match.

Rationale: No athlete participating in a match is permitted to wear any type of audio or video device to record, transmit, or live stream. This language aligns with other NFHS rules books. The use of electronic communication devices with players on the field is still prohibited. State associations may further restrict electronic devices.

5-3-1f-j: Change updates the officiating procedures for issuing yellow and red cards by removing the term carded in favor of consistent terminology already used in the rules book; cautioned and ejected.

Rationale: This aligns terminology by removing the term “carded” and using language found within the rules book. Explicitly defining that cautions correspond to yellow cards and ejections correspond to red cards provide clarity. Repeated or redundant language has been reorganized into new sub articles to improve readability and consistency across the rule. Additionally, the revision clarifies that any player who is shown a card, yellow or red, must still leave the field of play and that officials are responsible for directing the player to do so.

8-1-2: Clarifies when a kickoff should be retaken, specifically when not all players are on their half of the field.

Rationale: This change provides clarity on the differing restarts regarding kickoff offenses. This change explicitly addresses situations when the kickoff should be retaken because players were not properly positioned on their half of the field.

12-1-2c: Emphasizes the importance of goalkeeper safety when in possession of the ball and improves clarity for consistent officiating purposes.

Rationale: Overall, this change aligns the rule with consistent officiating practice, removes redundancies and improves clarity without materially altering when a charge is or is not permitted. The change consolidates language referring to the goalkeeper controlling the ball with their hands, where the simplified language refers to the full, shared definition referenced in a later section. This change emphasizes the core safety concept that remains unchanged: the goalkeeper in possession of the ball with their hands cannot be charged or challenged.

12-2-3: Adds biting to direct free kick fouls.

Rationale: Incorporates biting into direct free kick fouls.

12-3-1 thru 3: Extends goalkeeper possession limit and adjusts the penalty when the time limit is exceeded.

Rationale: Reorganizes goalkeeper restrictions, extends goalkeeper possession limit from six to eight seconds and changes the penalty from indirect free kick at the point of infraction to a corner kick. It brings the rule in line with the spirit of the game and gives officials clearer authority and makes the punishment less severe when the goalkeeper clearly exceeds the time limit.

12-3-5: Clarifies considerations of dangerous play.

Rationale: Adds clarifying language to the considerations for dangerous play that include actions that prevent a nearby opponent from playing the ball for fear of injury.

12-3-6 & 7 (NEW): Offers flexibility for officials when addressing verbal offenses by categorizing them as indirect free kick fouls.

Rationale: By including "other verbal offenses" as an indirect free kick foul, this also gives more flexibility for officials when disciplining verbal offenses: they are now considered fouls at a minimum and may rise to the level of misconduct depending on the circumstances. New Article 7 then addresses any other reason for which play is stopped for misconduct; play is restarted with an indirect free kick.

12-6-1b (1-4) (NEW): Adds language to provide additional guidance regarding DOGSO.

Rationale: This change clarifies and simplifies the language surrounding DOGSO ejections by removing redundant wording, eliminating references to "attempted" DOGSO, since intent is not part of the decision, and aligns with previous rule wording within Rule 12. The updated structure provides four clear categories for denying a goal or obvious opportunity.

13-1 thru 3: Reorganizes free kick restart procedures into distinct categories, clarifying when, where, and how free kicks are awarded and taken, while incorporating guidance for situations involving outside agents, off-field offenses, thrown objects, and unauthorized field entry or exit.

Rationale: The revision of Rule 13 clarifies the 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 should be taken. It also specifies the correct restart

locations and provides guidance for officials on managing these situations. Additionally, 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: Encroachment is now penalized only when it clearly impacts the kick outcome, and goalkeepers receive a warning for a first offense rather than an immediate caution. Deceptive movements and stutter-stepping remain permitted during the run-up, but feinting after the approach is completed is prohibited.

Rationale: The rewrite ensures that encroachment is now only penalized 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, the revisions continue to allow for 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, the kicker is penalized, as their illegal feinting is typically the catalyst for the goalkeeper's infraction. The penalty chart is also updated and reformatted for clarity.