



## **2012 FOOTBALL POINTS OF EMPHASIS**

### **CONCUSSIONS, CONTACT TO AND WITH THE HELMET, HELMET TECHNOLOGY AND PROPER HELMET FITTING**

Once again, the NFHS Football Rules Committee has chosen to emphasize the head and helmet as a point of emphasis for the 2012 season. Concerns continue about 1) concussion and the risks of initiating contact with and to the helmet; 2) contact initiated above the shoulders, particularly contact to the helmet, both by the person receiving the contact, and the person delivering the contact; and 3) proper helmet fitting. Game officials, coaches, administrators and players involved in the game must continue to be diligent as it relates to all of these aspects.

#### **Concussions**

Concussions continue to be a focus of attention in football at all levels of competition. The NFHS has been at the forefront of national sports organizations in emphasizing the importance of concussion education, recognition and proper management.

Discussion of proper concussion management at all levels of play in all sports has led to the adoption of rules changes and concussion-specific policies by multiple athletic organizations, state associations and school districts. Coaches and game officials need to become familiar with the signs and symptoms of a concussed athlete so that appropriate steps can be taken to safeguard the health and safety of participants.

Athletes must know that they should never try to “tough out” a suspected concussion. Teammates, parents and coaches should never encourage an athlete to “play through” the symptoms of a concussion. In addition, there should never be an attribution of bravery associated with athletes who play despite having concussion signs or symptoms. The risks of such behavior must be emphasized to all members of the team, as well as all coaches and parents. If an athlete returns to activity before being fully healed from an initial concussion, the athlete is at an increased risk for a repeat concussion. A repeat concussion that occurs before the brain has a chance to recover from the first can slow recovery or increase the chance for long-term problems. In rare cases, a repeat concussion can result in severe swelling and bleeding in the brain that can be fatal. Governing bodies at all levels of play continue to review and revise playing rules and encourage practices that decrease the risk of concussion. Among the most concerning data from the past several high school football seasons is that concussions continue to account for a high percentage of the injuries reported and that more than half of all concussions were a direct result of helmet-to-helmet contact!

All coaches should undergo education and utilize available professional development tools regarding the signs and symptoms of concussion and the proper management of athletes with a suspected concussion. The NFHS offers the free course “Concussion in Sports: What You Need to Know” that is available at [www.nfhslearn.com](http://www.nfhslearn.com). The free course is a brief and user-friendly resource not just for coaches, but also for students, parents and other interested persons. Many states have developed their own education programs. It is incumbent upon coaches to lead by example in recognizing the seriousness of all suspected concussions.

## **Contact to and with the Helmet**

Over the years, the NFHS Football Rules Committee has repeatedly emphasized the need to keep the HEAD OUT OF FOOTBALL because of the potential for catastrophic head and neck injuries. The committee – in its publications for review by coaches and game officials – has specifically targeted some form of helmet review or illegal helmet contact emphasis 24 times since 1980. In the past few years, all levels of football have increased the focus on decreasing the risk of concussion, and it is widely conceded that one of the biggest steps in this effort is to eliminate direct helmet-to-helmet contact and any other contact both with and to the helmet.

Any initiation of contact with the helmet is illegal; therefore, there must be a focus on enforcing the existing rules. These rules include fouls such as butt blocking, face tackling and spearing (all of which are illegal helmet contact fouls) as well as other acts prohibited by the provisions regarding unnecessary roughness. These types of contact, such as blows to the head by the defender, initiating contact to the head, and helmet-to-helmet contact are all unnecessary to the playing of the game. When in doubt, contact to or with the helmet should be ruled a foul by game officials.

## **Helmet Technology and Proper Helmet Fitting**

The heightened concern about concussions and the variety of football helmets available have led participants and coaches to seek a helmet that they believe will best protect a player from concussion. While many new football helmets incorporate innovative materials and designs, no existing football helmet is “concussion proof.” Therefore, it is incumbent upon athletic administrators, coaches, game officials, parents and participants to understand the limitations of all protective equipment, including the helmet. Everyone must realize that a combination of best practices, including but not limited to, repeated instruction on proper tackling and blocking techniques, proper helmet fitting and equipment tracking/recertification procedures, and proper and consistent officiating, are the keys to limiting injury risk and must be emphasized within each program.

Proper helmet fit has been a concern in recent years as anecdotal and documented reports of players having helmets completely dislodged during games continue to mount. To emphasize this point, the NFHS Football Rules Committee has passed a rule for the 2012 season that will require the athlete to leave the game for a single play if the helmet comes off during live ball action, unless the removal is due to a foul by the defense. If no foul is called, then the player must be removed. It is imperative that the athletes take an active role in the proper fitting, wear and use of the helmet and realize the “comfort” shortcuts are not permitted.

Every football helmet manufacturer provides various helmet-fitting pamphlets with each helmet sold, detailing how to properly fit the helmet. If the helmet-fitting pamphlets or other football helmet-related instructions are missing, please contact the respective football helmet manufacturer.

## **HEAT ACCLIMATIZATION AND PREVENTING HEAT ILLNESS**

Exertional Heatstroke (EHS) is the leading cause of preventable death in high school athletics. Athletes participating in high-intensity, long-duration or repeated same-day practices during the summer months or other hot-weather days pose the greatest risk. Football has received the most attention because of the number and severity of exertional heat illnesses. Notably, the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research reports that 35 high school football players died of EHS between 1995 and 2010. EHS also results in thousands of emergency room visits and hospitalizations throughout the nation each year.

In the spring of 2012, the NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) will release a new position statement “Heat Acclimatization and Heat Illness Prevention.” The position statement is intended to provide an outline of “Fundamentals” and may be used as a guiding document by member state associations. Also, the

NFHS will release a 20-minute free online course “A Guide to Heat Acclimatization and Heat Illness Prevention” at [www.nfhslearn.com](http://www.nfhslearn.com), regarding this life-threatening topic. Further and more detailed information will be found within the NFHS online course, as well as the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of the NFHS Sports Medicine Handbook, the NFHS SMAC position statement “Recommendations for Hydration to Minimize the Risk for Dehydration and Heat Illness” and other resources.

The new position statement and online course are intended to reduce the risk and incidence of EHS and the resulting deaths and injuries. The NFHS recognizes that various states and regions of the country have unique climates and an assortment of resources, and that there is no “one-size-fits-all” optimal acclimatization plan. However, the NFHS and the NFHS SMAC strongly encourage member state associations to incorporate all of the “Fundamental Musts” into any heat acclimatization plan to improve athlete safety. In addition, the online “A Guide to Heat Acclimatization and Heat Illness Prevention” should be required viewing for all coaches.

### **Heat Acclimatization and Heat Illness Prevention Keys for Coaches**

1. Recognize that Exertional Heatstroke (EHS) is the leading preventable cause of death among high school athletes.
2. Know the importance of a formal pre-season heat acclimatization plan.
3. Know the importance of having and implementing a specific hydration plan, keeping your athletes well hydrated, and providing ample opportunities for, and encouraging, regular fluid replacement.
4. Know the importance of appropriately modifying activities in relation to the environmental heat stress and contributing individual risk factors (e.g., illness, obesity) to keep your athletes safe and performing well.
5. Know the importance for all staff to closely monitor all athletes during practice and training in the heat, and recognize the signs and symptoms of developing heat illnesses.
6. Know the importance of, and resources for, establishing an emergency action plan, practicing the aspects of that plan, and promptly implementing it in case of suspected EHS or other medical emergency.

### **Fundamentals of a Heat Acclimatization Plan**

1. Physical exertion and training activities should begin slowly and continue progressively. An athlete cannot be “conditioned” in a period of only two to three weeks.
2. Keep each athlete’s individual level of conditioning and medical status in mind and adjust activity accordingly. These factors directly affect heat illness risk.
3. Adjust intensity (lower) and rest breaks (increase frequency/duration), and consider reducing uniform and protective equipment, while being sure to monitor all players more closely as conditions are increasingly warm/humid, especially if there is a change in weather from the previous few days.
4. Athletes must begin practices and training activities adequately hydrated.
5. Recognize early signs of distress and developing exertional heat illness, and promptly adjust activity and treat accordingly. First aid should not be delayed!
6. Recognize more serious signs of exertional heat-related distress (clumsiness, stumbling, collapse, obvious behavioral changes and/or other central nervous system problems), immediately stop activity and promptly seek medical attention by activating the Emergency Medical System. On-site rapid cooling should begin immediately.
7. An Emergency Action Plan with clearly defined written and practiced protocols should be developed and in place ahead of time.

### **HURDLING**

In 2012, the committee had requests to change the hurdling rule and eliminate it as a foul. By definition: *“Hurdling is an attempt by a player to jump (hurdle) with one or both feet or knees foremost over an opponent who is contacting the ground with no part of his body except one or both feet.”* This is an Illegal Personal

Contact Foul (NFHS Football Rule 9-4-3d) and carries a 15-yard penalty. Recently, national and local media have identified some of these plays at the collegiate and professional levels as “spectacular feats” and glorified the individual’s athletic ability instead of pointing out the heightened potential for harm. Little regard has been given to the fact that attempting to “hurdle” a defender increases the risk of injury to both the hurdler and tackler! The NFHS SMAC requested that this rule not be changed and backed up its request by showing several incidences where players were severely injured while attempting this act! The NFHS Football Rules Committee concurred with the SMAC and did not change the hurdling rule. In addition, to focus on the dangers associated with hurdling, it has been included as a Point of Emphasis for the 2012 season. The emphasis on this illegal act supports the committee’s ongoing attempt to minimize the risk of injuries in high school football. Coaches must teach their players of the inherent dangers associated with this illegal act, and game officials must call it when observed.

### **ILLEGAL BLOCKING BELOW THE WAIST**

In high school football, there are very specific rules regarding the time and circumstances when blocking below the waist is legal. There continues to be problems with game officials not enforcing these restrictions on who can block, who can be blocked and where/when these blocks can occur. In order for a block below the waist to be legal, the following criteria must be met:

1. Both players must be lined up in the free-blocking zone at the snap and on the line of scrimmage. The free-blocking zone is defined as 3 yards on either side of the line of scrimmage and 4 yards either side of the ball.
2. The contact/block must occur in the free-blocking zone.
3. The ball must still be in the free-blocking zone.

The NFHS Football Rules Committee wants to emphasize several examples where it is important to enforce this rule. When a team is lined up in shotgun formation, the restrictions on blocking below the waist begin the moment that the ball leaves the free-blocking zone. Because a shotgun quarterback is usually positioned more than 3 yards behind the line at the snap, when the ball is snapped the ball very quickly leaves the zone and therefore, the only legal blocks below the waist have to be initiated simultaneously with the snap.

Another common example of an illegal block below the waist is when running backs, who line up in the backfield, are “cut” by defenders on sweeps or on roll-out passes. This is clearly a violation of the blocking-below-the-waist rule because it occurs by a player who was not originally on the line of scrimmage and occurs outside the free-blocking zone.

Remember, players on the line of scrimmage and in the free-blocking zone at the time of the snap can legally block below the waist, but only if the free-blocking zone still exists because the ball has not left the zone. The rule applies equally to the offense and the defense.

### **ILLEGAL SHIFTS INVOLVING THE QUARTERBACK**

As today’s offensive formations continue to become more complex, it must be stressed to all coaches and game officials the need to eliminate illegal shifts involving the quarterback. Whenever any player on the offensive team moves to a new position after the ready-for-play signal and before the snap, it is a shift (NFHS Football Rule 2-39). Coaches and game officials must recognize that certain movements by quarterbacks must also be penalized as illegal shifts.

There are several examples of movements by the quarterback that would be considered an illegal shift, such as when all offensive players immediately get into their stance and then the quarterback receives the snap as soon

as he/she gets their hands under center. This is illegal because the quarterback needs to be set for one second prior to the snap after the linemen going into stance as this is, in fact, a shift. An illegal-shift foul also occurs when the quarterback first sends a player in motion and after the player is in motion, the quarterback then goes under center to receive the snap.

When all other offensive players are set, movements by the quarterback, other than slightly moving a foot to start another player in motion, must be followed by a pause of one second by everyone on the offense to be considered a legal shift. If the offense is allowed to execute illegal shifts or other movements, teams will gain an advantage not intended by the rules and will disrupt the desired balance between offense and defense.

## **IMPROPER UNIFORMS**

These issues can be grouped into two general categories. Not properly wearing mandatory player equipment and wearing illegal equipment/adornments.

### **Not Properly Wearing Mandatory Player Equipment:**

Pants not covering the knee – Over the years, the NFHS Football Rules Committee has repeatedly emphasized that player equipment must be worn for the protection of the athletes. One piece of player equipment that continues to be inconsistently enforced is the football pants and the required protection of the knee. The committee is encouraging a renewed focus by both coaches and game officials to make sure that pants are worn properly to completely cover the knee. Coaches need to make sure that equipment handed out to players is properly fitted and continues to properly fit throughout the season. Game officials need to recognize when mandatory equipment is not being worn properly and most importantly, game officials must penalize these acts consistently throughout the game, regardless of the situation and regardless of anyone's feelings about the rule as compared to other levels of football.

### **Wearing Illegal Equipment/Adornments:**

1. Uniform Adornments – Common violations or issues include:
  - A. Wearing a tinted eye shield – For purpose of injury prevention and recognition, eye shields attached to the helmets must be clear without the presence of any tint and constructed of a molded rigid material.
  - B. Wearing towels that exceed the allowed specifications – One, white, unmarked moisture-absorbing towel can be worn. Towel width is a minimum of 4 inches and maximum of 18 inches, while the length is a minimum of 12 inches and a maximum of 36 inches.
  - C. Wearing sweatbands at an improper location – Moisture-absorbing sweatbands of any color are allowed to be worn as long as they are worn on the wrist, beginning at the base of the thumb and extending no more than 3 inches toward the elbow.
  - D. Wearing bicep bands, neck bands and leg bands – Any moisture-absorbing or other band worn on any other area of the body beside the wrist, other than for medical reasons, is considered an illegal uniform adornment.
  - E. Uncovered shoulder, rib and back protectors – These protectors are to be fully covered by the jersey in order to be legal.
  - F. Altered knee and ankle braces – As long as knee and ankle braces are unaltered and worn as intended by the manufacturer's original design, no additional padding is required. If any alterations are done from the manufacturer's design and production, or the brace is worn in a manner other than allowed by rule, the brace is illegal.

- G. Wearing jewelry – Any jewelry other than religious and medical alert medals is considered illegal. Religious medals must be taped and worn under the uniform and medical-alert medals must be taped and may be visible.
- H. Illegal pads and padding – Hard and unyielding items (guards, casts, braces, etc.) on the hand, wrist, forearm, elbow or upper arm are illegal unless padded with a closed-cell, slow-recovery foam padding no less than ½-inch thick.
- I. Helmets not secured properly – Helmets must be secured by a properly fastened chinstrap with at least four attachment points.

Coaches and game officials need to be cognizant of the adornments worn by the players, and game officials need to consistently enforce the rules regarding illegal equipment and adornments to prevent further problems from developing with player safety and sportsmanship.