

## CHAPTER 3

### SCRIMMAGE REQUIREMENTS AND LIVE/DEAD BALL

#### 1. The Rules in Brief

- The ball is put in play by a kickoff to start each half and to resume play after a try or successful field goal. A snap puts the ball in play when a free kick is not specified or elected after a fair catch or awarded fair catch. After being put in play, the ball remains live until the down ends.

- A down is action which starts with a legal snap to begin a scrimmage down or when the ball is kicked to start a free kick down. A down ends when the ball next becomes dead.

- Possession connotes a live ball that is held and controlled by a player.

- A live ball is always in possession of a team and must be either in player possession or loose.

#### **2.**

##### Possession

The first fundamental that is essential to grasp is **possession**. Possession connotes a live ball that is held and controlled by a player (2-34-1). A live ball is always in possession of a team and must be either in player possession or loose. In the basketball world, possession is very simple. The ball always belongs to the opponents of the team which caused the ball to go out of bounds. In football, there is no such blanket declaration. In fact, in most cases the opposite is true – the ball belongs to the team which had team possession when the ball went out of bounds. Here are the highlights of the rules regarding possession.

- A ball which is fumbled out of bounds between the goal lines belongs to the fumbling team at the out-of-bounds spot (7-4-3a).
- A backward pass which goes out of bounds between the goal lines belongs to the passing team at the out-of-bounds spot (7-4-3a).
- A fumble or pass which is jointly possessed by opponents belongs to the team last in possession (7-4-3c, 7-5-4).
- An incomplete legal forward pass is returned to the passing team at the previous spot (4-3-4, 4-3-5a).

✱ Note: If any of the above occur to Team A on fourth down, the ball would then be awarded to Team B if it is short of the line-to-gain.

- A fumble or backward pass which is declared dead in the opponent's end zone with no player in possession is a touchdown for the team last in possession (8-2-1c).
- A legal kick which is jointly possessed by opponents belongs to the receiving team (5-1-3e, 5-1-5d).
- A legal kick which is declared dead in the field of play with no player in possession belongs to the receiving team (5-1-3e).
- A free kick which goes out of bounds between the goal lines untouched by Team R is a foul (6-1-8).
- A free kick which goes out of bounds between the goal lines touched by Team R belongs to Team R at the out-of-bounds spot (5-1-5a).
- A scrimmage kick which goes out of bounds between the goal lines belongs to Team R (5-1-3e).
- A scrimmage kick which is declared dead in the kicking team's end zone with no player in possession is a safety if forced by Team K and a touchback if forced by Team R (6-3-2, 8-5-2b, 8-5-3b).
- The rules above do not apply when the ball is declared dead with no one in possession because of an inadvertent whistle (4-2-3a, b).
- A change of possession occurs when a Team B or R player gains possession during the down (2-34-3).
- Possession cannot be gained if touching the ball causes it to become dead.

3.

### Formations and Numbering

There are three types of allowable formations: scrimmage, scrimmage kick and free kick (2-14).

For a **scrimmage formation** (2-14-1), restrictions on Team A at the time the ball is snapped govern location of players, formations, and motion.

To prevent hide-out plays, the rules (7-2-1) require all Team A players be between the nine-yard marks sometime after the ball is declared ready for play and before the snap.

This rule is intended to prevent a Team A player from remaining near the sideline outside the nine-yard mark following a play or a Team A substitute from slipping onto the field and setting up near his sideline just before the snap. The foul is for an illegal formation, a five-yard penalty from the previous spot (7.2.1A).

Formations and location of players also refer to their position "on the line" or "in the backfield." In defining these terms we make use of two imaginary planes, both perpendicular to the ground and parallel to the line. One runs through the waist of the snapper and the other runs through the waist of a lineman.

A scrimmage formation for Team A (2-14-1) must have at least seven players on the line of scrimmage (7-2-5a). They may have more, of course, but without a minimum of seven Team A is guilty of an illegal formation. To be on the line of scrimmage (2-25-2) means a player is facing his opponent's goal line with his shoulders parallel to the goal line and with his head or foot breaking the imaginary plane that passes through the waist of the snapper (2-32-9). The generally accepted rule of thumb is a player's shoulders must be within 30 degrees of the line to be considered parallel.

Of these seven linemen, at least five must be numbered 50-79 unless Team A is in a scrimmage kick formation.

C.

In summary, then, the illegal formations are:

- Less than seven players on the line.
- Fewer than five players on the line numbered 50-79, except when in a scrimmage kick formation on fourth down or a try.
- On first, second, or third down and in the field goal type of scrimmage kick formation, any interior lineman other than the snapper is wearing a uniform number outside the 50-79 range.

A. | B.

A **scrimmage kick formation** is one where no Team A player is in a position to receive a hand-to-hand snap and there is either a player in position with a knee on the ground at least seven yards behind the line in position to be the holder with another player three yards or less further back in position to attempt a place kick (2-14-2a) or a player at least 10 yards behind the line (2-14-2b). In either case that player must be in position to receive a long snap.

In a scrimmage kick formation, Team A is allowed to have any number of linemen whose uniform numbers lie outside the 50-79 range on fourth down or a try (7-2-5b Exc 2). On any other down, only the snapper may have a uniform number outside the 50-79 range if his team is using the 2-14-2a type of scrimmage-kick formation (7-2-5b Exc 1).

To gain such an exemption, a player must assume an initial position on his line between the ends. Once such a player assumes that initial position as an interior lineman, he is an ineligible receiver. If a subsequent shift leaves the exempted player in the position of an eligible receiver, he remains ineligible (7-2-5b Exc 2 and 7.2.5D).

Everyone not on the line must be in the backfield. There is more to this than simply not being on the line. To be in the backfield (2-32-3) a player must be positioned so that no part of his body penetrates the plane that passes through the waist of the nearest lineman other than the snapper.

This means there is a sort of "no-man's-land," - a region between these two vertical planes

making it possible (though illegal) for a player to be neither on the line nor in the backfield. It is legal (7-2-3) for one player to be in this forbidden zone - the quarterback. The rule book refers to this as a player with "... his hands in position to receive the ball if it is snapped between the snapper's legs." However, that player does not have to receive the snap. Anyone else in this in-between region when the ball is snapped is neither a back nor a lineman.

- Linemen other than the guards and snapper interlocking legs.
- A player is not between the nine-yard marks after ready-for-play and before the snap.

These are not fouls until the ball is snapped, which means Team A may legally shift to correct the situation and make the formation legal prior to the snap. Illegal formation fouls carry a five-yard penalty from the previous spot.

## SCRIMMAGE REQUIREMENTS

- Snapping the ball is handing or passing it backward from the ground with a quick, continuous motion.
- The neutral zone is established when the referee declares the ball ready for play.
- Encroachment is when a player is illegally in the neutral zone.

### Offensive (Team A) Requirements

#### Prior to the Snap

- Once the snapper touches the ball, he must keep one hand on it. If he puts both hands on the ball, he may take one hand off if he does so without simulating the beginning of a play.
- The snapper must clearly pause after touching the ball and before it is snapped.
- After the ready, no player other than the snapper may touch the ball, and no player can touch an opponent.
- After the snapper touches the ball and the ready has been blown, no player may be in or beyond the neutral zone. Replaced players and incoming substitutes are exempt from this restriction.
- After the ready, no offensive player may commit a false start. A false start is any shift or movement that simulates the beginning of a play.
- Offensive linemen between the snapper and the player on the end of the line, having placed a hand or hands on or near the ground, may not move a hand or hands or otherwise make any quick movement. This is a false start.
- If an offensive lineman moves when threatened by the action of a defensive player who enters the neutral zone, it is an encroachment foul against the defense. The ball remains dead.

### Defensive (Team B) Requirements

#### Prior to the Snap

- After the ready, no defensive player may touch the ball, an opponent, or enter the neutral zone to give defensive signals.
- The defense may not use "disconcerting acts or words" that interfere with the snap count or cadence of the offense.
- After the snapper touches the ball and the ready has been whistled, no player may be in or beyond the neutral zone. Replaced players and incoming substitutes are exempt from this restriction.

#### At the Snap

- All players must be inbounds.

#### At the Snap

- The scrimmage down starts with a legal snap, and the ball remains dead if the snap is illegal.
- All players must be inbounds.
- Each Team A player (*substitutes and players who participated in the previous down*) must have been between the nine-yard marks sometime after the ready and before the snap.
- Team A must have at least seven players on the scrimmage line. "On the scrimmage line" means the player faces his opponent's goal line with his shoulders parallel to that line and his head breaking the vertical plane through the waist of the snapper.
- No fewer than five linemen must be numbered 50-79, except in a scrimmage kick formation.
- A scrimmage kick formation is one where no Team A player is in a position to receive a hand-to-hand snap and there is either a player in position with a knee on the ground at least seven yards behind the line in position to be the holder with another player three yards or less further back in position to attempt a place kick or a player at least 10 yards back. In either case that player must be in position to receive a long snap.
- In a scrimmage kick formation on fourth down or a try, Team A is allowed to have any number of linemen whose uniform numbers lie outside the 50-79 range.
- On first, second or third down, only the snapper may have a uniform number outside the 50-79 range provided his team is using the field goal type of scrimmage-kick formation.
- Team A players not on the line (with one exception) must be legally in the backfield. "In the backfield" means no part of the player's body breaks the plane through the waist of the nearest teammate who is on the line.
- One back may be in "no-man's-land" between the backfield and the line: a player in position to receive a hand-to-hand snap from between the snapper's legs (normally, of course, this is the quarterback). That player is not required to receive the snap.
- The guards may interlock legs with the snapper, but the other linemen must have each foot outside the foot of the player nearest to him.
- Only the snapper may be in the neutral zone, but he must not be beyond the zone except for his hands, which may be on the foremost point of the ball.
- One man may be in motion parallel to or away from his scrimmage line. There are further restrictions on players who start in motion from the scrimmage line. The penalty is for illegal motion, five yards from the previous spot.
- A **shift** is the movement of one or more offensive players before the snap. After a shift, all players must stop and remain stationary for at least one second before the snap or before a lone player goes in motion.

5.

## False Starts

No player of the offensive team may make a **false start** (7-1-7). What does this mean? For the interior offensive linemen, it is clearly spelled out; any lineman between the snapper and the end lineman who has placed his hand or hands on or near the ground may not move his hand or make any quick movement. Please note this means the snapper is not restricted. In particular, linemen once set may not be called off the line to re-huddle.

Notice the restriction applies only to *interior linemen* (not the ends) and not necessarily to players wearing numbers 50-79. Thus, if number 73 lines up in the backfield, he is not restricted in the same way as an interior lineman (7-1-7c).

Between the ready and the snap, if a Team A lineman reacts to an opponent who enters the neutral zone, it is a foul by the defense the instant the defensive player breaks the plane of the neutral zone (7-1-6). Note that whether or not the offensive man moves into the neutral zone is irrelevant. In either case, it is a Team B dead-ball foul.

The same applies if the defense "induces" a false start with disconcerting acts or words (9-5-1d) - it is a Team B dead-ball foul. This is discussed in greater detail under "Defensive Requirements."

In the unusual case where an offensive lineman false starts and a defensive player encroaches at the same instant and the officials are unable to determine which player fouled first, the fouls offset and no yardage penalty is enforced (2001 interp, Sit 16).

For the rest of the offensive team, what constitutes a false start is a bit murkier. Rule 7-1-7a says offensive players may not make any movement that simulates the beginning of a play. If the quarterback abruptly "chucks" his hands under the snapper, it simulates snap action and is a false start.

After the ball is ready for play and all players are in scrimmage formation, no offensive player shall make a quick, jerky movement before the snap or make any movement whatsoever which is clearly intended to cause Team B to encroach (7-1-7b). Any such motion is an infraction of the rule.

Consequently, a shift in which the offensive line or the entire team lifts up abruptly, even though the linemen have not put their hand(s) near the ground, is most likely a false start. Such shifts are almost always designed to cause the defense to encroach.

As we shall discuss, the rules elsewhere (7-2-7) allow for one player to be in motion at the snap. So, the covering official has the responsibility of making a judgment about *how* the man goes in motion. It is the responsibility of an offensive player who moves before the snap to do so in a manner that in no way simulates the beginning of a play.

6.

## Shifts

If a player on the offensive team moves to a new position after the ready and before the snap, it is a **shift**, (2-39). There might be several shifts between the ready and the snap (breaking the huddle (2-21) is a shift), but no matter how many there are, after the last shift all members of the offensive team must stop and remain still for at least one second (7-2-6). After this one-second pause, the ball may be snapped, or one player may go legally in motion and still be moving away from or parallel to his scrimmage line when the ball is snapped. The point is the shift must be separated from the rest of the action by the one-second pause. Otherwise it is an illegal shift (live-ball foul) simultaneous with the snap. The penalty is five yards from the previous spot.

There is one situation where shift restrictions do not apply to foot movement. The quarterback may move one foot up or down while otherwise stationary to signal a player to start in motion. However, if he lowers his body into position to receive a snap, moves his hands under center, moves either foot forward, or makes any other similar forward movement after he comes to the line and all players are set, he has shifted and must pause for a second with all other players stationary for the play to be legal. A backward foot movement would be legal motion provided no other player is in motion.

Interior linemen usually shift in place. A tackle or a covered tight end may legally shift and change position as long as the movement is not abrupt and the player has not placed a hand on or near the ground.

7.

## Motion

In 7-2-7, the rules allow for the offense to have one man in motion at the time the ball is snapped. This player must be moving parallel to or towards his own goal line (away from the line of scrimmage) at the moment the ball is snapped.

As stated earlier, the manner in which this player begins his motion is important. It is the responsibility of an offensive player who moves before the snap to do so in a manner that in no way simulates the beginning of a play. In other words, a player who is permitted to move under 7-2-7 still may not commit a false start.

If the man in motion starts from a position not clearly behind the line (either on the line or in no-man's land), he must either establish himself as a back by stopping for at least one full second while he is legally in the backfield or he must be at least five yards behind his line of scrimmage at the snap (7-2-7). The man in motion must be in the backfield at the snap (2001 interp, Sit 17).

Illegal motion is a live-ball foul that carries a five-yard penalty from the previous spot.



**8A.**

### Encroachment

There are two "phases" of encroachment restrictions. The first begins at the ready-for-play and the second when the snapper touches the ball. The first phase primarily restricts the defense and is discussed later in this chapter.

Most often, the ready will precede the snapper touching the ball. If however, the snapper touches the ball before the ready, encroachment restrictions are not in effect (7-1.6C).

After the ready, once the snapper has touched the ball, the offensive team is not allowed to be in the neutral zone (7-1-6). The exceptions are replaced players who cross the neutral zone as they head to the sideline and incoming substitutes who pass through the neutral zone on their way from the team area. Also, the snapper may be in the neutral zone (usually with his head), but not beyond it, except for his hand(s) which may be on the foremost point of the ball (7-1-1). Encroachment is a dead-ball foul that carries a five-yard penalty.

In a scrimmage kick formation, linemen sometimes break their scrimmage plane by pointing at the opponents to confirm blocking assignments. The rulebook is silent on this point, and it is thus technically a foul. However, veteran officials will not flag this inadvertent and inconsequential act.

### **At the Snap**

A defensive player is on his line of scrimmage when he is within one yard of his scrimmage line at the snap (2-25-3). This definition is used to determine which players offensive linemen can block in the expanded neutral zone during pass plays (see Chapter 5) and those which can be blocked from the rear or below the waist in the free-blocking zone (see Chapter 8).

The rules for Team B are even simpler when the ball is snapped. In addition to all their players being behind the neutral zone, they also must be inbounds. There are no other restrictions.

## Defensive (Team B) Requirements

**B.**

### **Prior to the Snap**

There aren't many restrictions on Team B before the snap. Earlier in the discussion of Team A restrictions, we mentioned two "phases" of encroachment restrictions. The first begins at the ready-for-play - no defensive player may touch the ball, an opponent, or enter the neutral zone to give defensive signals (7-1-5).

Team B is allowed to otherwise be in or beyond the neutral zone (probably inadvertently) until the second phase begins - when snapper touches the ball. After that, no player may encroach. Replaced players and incoming substitutes are exempt from this restriction. Replaced players may cross the neutral zone as they head to the sideline and incoming substitutes may pass through the neutral zone on their way from the team area.

Like offensive encroachment, defensive encroachment is a dead-ball foul with a five-yard penalty.

If a personal foul is committed as a player encroaches, both fouls are enforced.

The only other restriction on Team B involves "disconcerting acts or words" (9-5-1d). Team B is not permitted to call defensive signals that simulate the sound or cadence of, or otherwise interfere with, Team A's snap count. If the quarterback changes the play with an audible, the defense is not permitted to interfere with that either. The defense may use verbal signals, but they must be different than those used by the offense. Team A gets first choice; defenses who use "Hut", "Hike", or "Go" must change signals. This dead-ball foul carries a 15-yard penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct.

However, defensive players are not permitted to deliberately feint a charge to provoke Team A linemen into moving. Team B players who are stationary within one yard of their line of scrimmage are prohibited from making quick non-football related movements in an obvious attempt to draw an offensive player into committing a foul.

Examples of violations include: stomping a foot, clapping hands, quickly standing up or moving to a three- or four-point stance or vice versa, quickly bobbing their head or repeatedly and/or abruptly flexing legs or arms.

This dead-ball foul carries a 15-yard penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct. Consequently, any movement by a Team A player is ignored. Movement by a Team A player is not required in order for a defensive foul to occur.

9.

**LIVE/DEAD BALL**

Whenever an official blows his whistle, the ball is normally already dead. The only exception is an inadvertent whistle. No foul causes the ball to become dead. An official should blow his whistle to signal the ball is dead when:

- The ball or the ball carrier goes out of bounds;
- The ball carrier's forward progress is stopped;
- Any part of the ball carrier's body other than his hand or foot touches the ground (exception: the ball remains live if at the snap a place kick holder has a knee on the ground and a teammate is in kicking position);
- A score or touchback occurs;
- A non-scoring kick or a grounded scoring kick breaks the plane of Team R's goal line;
- A scoring kick touches a Team K player in the end zone or has failed after breaking the plane of Team R's goal line;
- A kicking team player catches or recovers any free kick anywhere;
- A kicking team player catches or recovers a scrimmage kick which is beyond the neutral zone;
- A loose ball comes to rest and no one attempts to recover it;
- A loose ball touches or is touched by, anything inbounds other than a player, substitute, replaced player, an official, authorized equipment, or the ground;
- A receiving team player catches or recovers a kick after he or any teammate makes a valid or invalid fair catch signal;
- A forward pass, legal or illegal, touches the ground;
- During a try, Team B gains possession or it is otherwise apparent a kick will fail;
- A simultaneous catch or recovery of a live ball occurs;
- The ball carrier's helmet comes completely off.

Although the rules do not address the situation where an official is in possession of the ball, it is recommended such a ball be declared dead. It should also be noted if a player simulates or fakes putting his knee to the ground, the ball is *not* dead.

10.

There are several situations where officials may get confused and think the ball is dead. When one of the following scenarios occurs, if a whistle is blown, it would be an inadvertent whistle. Inadvertent whistles are discussed in detail in Chapter 12.

- An interception in the end zone;
- A field goal attempt is blocked;
- A rolling kick is touched by a Team K player, or any other form of first touching;
- A runner breaks his fall by putting his hand on the ground or his knee lands on another player.

**11. Holder Restrictions**

A place kick holder, who at the snap has his knee(s) on the ground while there is a teammate in kicking position, must rise before he may advance, hand the ball to another player, kick, or pass. If the holder does any of these things while his knee(s) is on the ground, the ball is immediately dead.

If the holder rises to catch or recover an errant snap, and immediately returns his knee(s) to the ground and places the ball for a kick or again rises to advance, hand, kick or pass, the ball remains live.

If the holder muffs the snap and rises to secure the ball, the ball is dead if he returns his knee to the ground while holding the ball (4-2-2a Exc Nt; 4.2.2A-C)

4. After the ready, snapper A58 is the first Team A player to come to the line. Before he places a hand on the ball, A77 breaks the plane of the neutral zone. **RULING:** No foul. Encroachment restrictions are not in effect for Team A until the snapper touches the ball.

20. A7 throws a forward pass which strikes an official standing inbounds. The ball rebounds into the air and is caught by (a) A88, or (b) B26. **RULING:** The ball remains live; nothing has occurred to cause the ball to become dead.

21. With K13 in position to kick, holder K24 (a) fumbles the ball as he places it and he recovers with his knee still on the ground and then rises and runs, or (b) muffs the snap; the ball rolls away and K24 rises to recover and then returns to his knees to place the ball. **RULING:** In (a), legal play. In (b), the ball becomes dead when K24 touches his knee to the ground after rising.

12.

1. Before the ready-for-play, snapper A50 puts his hand on the ball. He then rises and removes his hand from the ball, to speak to the quarterback. **RULING:** No foul, since the snapper is not restricted until the ready.

2. On a try, Team A lines up in a "swinging gate" formation with A87 over the ball. A87 (a) touches the ball, or (b) places his hand six inches above the ball. Team A then shifts and A87 moves 10 yards to his right. **RULING:** A snap infraction in (a), but legal in (b).