

The Running Game

The runner is a player in possession of a live ball, or a player simulating possession of a live ball. 2.32.13

A running play begins with a legal snap or successful kick, pass or fumble recovery, and it ends when any of the following take place:

- The runner is tackled inbounds (anything other than his foot or hand touches the ground) 4.2.2
- The runner is forced out of bounds or loses the ball out of the field of play 4.2.2
- The runner's forward progress is stopped inbounds 4.2.2
- The runner crosses his opponent's goal line or his own end line 4.2.2
- The runner's helmet comes off 4.2.2
- An inadvertent whistle 4.2.2

The runner can be tackled by almost any means. He may be clipped, blocked in the back, and he may be tackled below the waist. He may not be tackled by the helmet (15 yards, 9.4.3h) or by a horse collar tackle (15 yards). Illegal use of the helmet when tackling the runner is not allowed (helmet to helmet, spearing, butt blocking, and face tackling – 9.4.3i).

Free Blocking Zone

The FBZ extends four yards laterally (each direction) from the spot the ball is snapped and three yards vertically from where the ball is snapped. Inside that zone, only as long as the ball is still in that zone, the offense can block the defense in the back as long as the offensive player was on the line at the snap and the defensive player was anywhere in the zone on his side of the line of scrimmage. The offense can also clip or block the defense below the waist as long as the ball remains in the zone and both the offensive and defensive player were both on the line of scrimmage at the snap. When the QB is in the shotgun formation, any of these blocks must be nearly simultaneous with the snap to meet the requirement of the ball being in the FBZ and the blocker(s) must be in either a three or four point stance. (2.17.1-5)

Things to Look For

Offensive blocking ahead of the runner must be legal. Lead blocking cannot consist of the following:

- Holding – grasping an opponent outside the frame in an attempt to hinder the opponent – Ten yards, spot of the foul, all but one (9.2.1c)
- Blocking in the back – must start and end in the back – Ten yards, spot foul, all but one (9.3.5)
- Blocking below the waist – front or side – Fifteen yards, all but one (9.3.2)
- Clipping – blocking in the rear, starting and ending below the waist – fifteen yards, spot of the foul, all but one (9.3.5)
- Helping the Runner – An offensive player shall not push, pull or lift the runner to assist his forward progress (9.1.1)

Things That Cannot Happen

Other things that cannot happen in the running game include:

- Aiding / helping the runner (9.1.1)
- Helmet / facemask tackling (9.4.3h)
- Hurdling by the runner (9.4.3d)
- Illegal forward handing (7.3.2-3)
- Illegal tackling or contact techniques that involve the helmet / facemask (9.4.3 – Note)
- Illegal participation by blocker or any A player who intentionally or unintentionally goes out of bounds, returns, and participates in the play.

The Running Game and the Goal Line

When running the ball into the opponent's end zone, only the foremost point of the ball must break the plane of the goal line in order to score a touchdown. However, when running the ball out of their own end zone, the entire ball must come out of the end zone in order to avoid a touchback.

Defensive players who recover a fumble inside their own five yard line and their momentum carries them into their own end zone and they are either tackled in their own end zone or fumble the ball out of their own end zone, the defense will next snap the ball from the spot where they recovered the fumble. (8.5.2a – Exc)

When the ball is snapped anywhere between the 5-yard line and either goal line, the wing officials should immediately move to the goal line at the snap and then work their way out as necessary.

The Running Game and Keys / Responsibilities

Referee: Ball carrier, from side line to side line, until the ball carrier crosses the line of scrimmage. The Referee also has out of bounds responsibilities behind the line of scrimmage. The referee counts the offense.

Umpire: Read the point of attack, pivot with the action, and watch the blocking for holds and illegal blocking or tackling techniques. The umpire counts the offense with the referee.

Linesman: Look for illegal formations, false starts and encroachment pre-snap. Count the offense with the referee. On sweeps to the linesman's side, focus on the blocking action in front of the ball carrier. Once the ball carrier is past the linesman, closely trail the play. Responsibilities include both the spot of forward progress and / or the out of bounds spot. If the runner goes out of bounds, responsibilities include getting the out of bounds spot and monitoring the actions out of bounds. Drop a bean bag and go get any player out of the sideline who doesn't belong there if necessary. When the play is away from the linesman, the linesman shall drift into the field of play and clean up behind the Referee and Umpire. Watch for cheap shots on the quarterback and any other extra-curricular activities away from the point of attack. Once the runner is down, proceed down the sideline to the spot of forward progress, square up (do not round off) pinch in until you feel pressure, get and hold the spot of forward progress with your forward foot extended. On plays near the sideline, stop or wind the clock based on forward progress as necessary and as needed.

Line Judge: Same pre-snap, side line, and “drifting” responsibilities as linesman. Counts the defense with the back judge. Additionally, the line judge has the primary responsibility of communicating first downs to the referee and crew.

Back Judge: Count defense and verify with the line judge prior to the snap. On sweeps to the sideline, watch the blocking forward of the runner, keeping the runner between the Back Judge and the wing official. Cover the goal line on long runs. On runs out of bounds behind the line of scrimmage, stay out, get the big picture. On runs out of bounds beyond the line of scrimmage, move into the bench area as needed to retrieve any opposing player from that sideline and bench area.

Officiating Philosophy and the Running Game

In reality, there’s probably a hold on every play. We want the teams and the players to decide the outcome of the game – not us. Because of this, we want our flags to count when we use them. Only fouls that provide one team or the other an unfair advantage or safety fouls need to be penalized. Talk to the players about anything else. Let them play their game.

Situations – Select All Possible Correct Answers

1. 3rd down, A 43 fumbles short of the line to gain. The ball crosses the line to gain, before going out of bounds, last touched by B41.

- (a) 1st/10 for Team A at the out of bounds spot
- (b) 4th down for Team A at spot of the fumble
- (c) 1st/10 for Team B
- (d) Clock starts on the ready

2. While his team is on defense, B67 clips an opponent by blocking him from behind and below the waist. Both players were on the line of scrimmage at the snap, and the ball was still in the free blocking zone.

- (a) Clipping is not a foul if committed by the defense.
- (b) It is possible for this act to be legal,
- (c) The penalty for clipping is 10 yards
- (d) If the penalty is accepted, it will be enforced according to the “all-but-one” principle.
- (e) None of the above

3. 2nd/7 at A35. After a running play that ends inbounds at A40, B79 and A83 are flagged for fighting. B79 threw the first punch.

- (a) The penalties cancel; 3rd/2 at the A40
- (b) The penalties cancel; 1st/10 at the A40
- (c) B79 and A83 are ejected for fighting
- (d) The clock starts on the ready

(e) None of the above

4. B69 is the nose guard lined up directly opposite the center and A72 is the right tackle. After the ready and before the snap, B69 lurches into the neutral zone. Simultaneously with B69's first movement, A72 flinches and lifts his hand from the ground. The officials cannot determine who moved first.

- (a) The officials stop the action and then the referee again declares the ball ready for play.
- (b) False start by A72
- (c) Encroachment by B69
- (d) Clock starts on the snap
- (e) Clock starts on the ready
- (f) Clock starts on the ready only if it was running at the time the officials stopped the play

5. B40 intercepts A18's forward pass at the B7. His momentum carries him into his end zone where he is downed. While in the field of play A13 grasps a Team B player's face mask during B40's run.

- (a) The result of the play is a safety
- (b) If accepted, the penalty for A13's foul is enforced from the goal line
- (c) If accepted, the penalty for A13's foul is enforced from the spot of the foul
- (d) If accepted, the penalty for A13's foul is enforced from the 20 yard line
- (e) Momentum exception – no safety – B's ball at 1st/10 at the B7
- (f) None of the above.

6. 3rd/7 at the A34. A23 carries the ball to the A38 and attempts to hand the ball forward to A78. A78 muffs the ball, it falls to the ground and is recovered and downed by an A player at the A42.

- (a) A's ball, 1st /10 at the A42.
- (b) Foul for illegal forward handing.
- (c) Foul for illegal forward pass made beyond the neutral zone.
- (d) The ball has been fumbled and may be recovered and advanced by either team.
- (e) Penalty against Team A at the A38 plus a loss of down.
- (f) None of the above

6. 2nd/8 at A32. A49 gains five yards to the A37. After the ball is dead, B79 piles on. After that penalty is accepted, A89 taunts B79 over his foul.

- (a) Both fouls cancel
- (b) A89 is ejected for taunting
- (c) Both fouls are administered in the order of their occurrence.
- (d) It will be A's ball, 3rd/3 at the A37
- (e) It will be A's ball, 1st/10 at the A37
- (f) The clock will start at the snap

7. B52 attempts to A42 by grabbing the inside back collar of his shoulder pads or jersey and (a) pushes A42 out of bounds, (b) swings him around and throws him to the ground (c) rides A42 out of bounds and pulls him down after the play has ended.

(a) No foul in (a)

(b) B52 is guilty of a horse collar tackle in (b)

(c) B52 is not guilty of a horse collar in (c). A42 is no longer a runner since he is out of bounds.

(d) B52 is guilty of a horse collar in (c). A42 is still considered a runner for foul and penalty enforcement purposes even if he is out of bounds

8. A runner can lower his head in an effort to gain yardage.

9. B52 tackles A22 who is not a runner. A22 was pretending to be a runner. No foul for holding.

10. If a third down fumble is recovered by A35 and B67 simultaneously, the ball belongs to B.