

RULE 7. Snapping and Passing the Ball

SECTION 1. The Scrimmage

Starting With a Snap

ARTICLE 1. The ball shall be put in play by a legal snap unless the rules provide for a legal free kick (A.R. 4-1-4-I and II).

PENALTY -Dead-ball foul. Five yards from the succeeding spot [S7 and S19].

Not Outside an Inbounds Line

ARTICLE 2. The ball may not be snapped between an inbounds line and the nearer sideline. If the starting point for any scrimmage down is between an inbounds line and the nearer sideline, it shall be transferred to the inbounds spot.

Offensive Team Requirements

ARTICLE 3. The offensive team requirements are as follows:

- a. After the ball is ready for play and before the ball is snapped:
 1.
 - a) The snapper, after assuming his position for the succeeding snap and touching or simulating (hand[s] at or below his knees) touching the ball, may not move to a different position.
 - b) The snapper may not lift the ball, move it beyond the neutral zone or simulate the start of a play.
 - c) The snapper may take his hand(s) off the ball if it does not simulate the start of a play.
 - d) Infractions of (a), (b) and (c) may be penalized whether or not the ball is snapped, and the penalty for any resulting offside by an opponent shall be canceled [S7 and S19] (A.R. 7-1-3-V and VI).
 2.
 - a) Each substitute of Team A shall have been between the nine-yard marks. Team A players who participated in the previous down shall have been between the nine-yard marks after the previous down and before the next snap (A.R. 3-3-4-III and IV) [S19].
 - b) All Team A players shall have been between the nine-yard marks after a team timeout, an injury timeout, a radio timeout, a television timeout or the end of a period [S19].
 3. No player of the offensive team shall be in or beyond the neutral zone after the snapper touches or simulates (hand[s] at or below his knees) touching the ball [**Exceptions:**(1) Substitutes and departing players; and (2) offensive players in a scrimmage kick formation who, after the snapper touches the ball, point at opponents and break the neutral zone with their hand(s)] [S7 and S19].
 4. No offensive player shall contact an opponent or make a false start, which includes (A.R. 7-1-3-IV) [S7 and S19]:
 - a) Feigning a charge.
 - b) A shift or movement that simulates the beginning of a play. This includes the snapper who, after assuming a position for the succeeding snap and touching or simulating (hand[s] at or below his knees) touching the ball, moves to another position.
 - c) A lineman between the snapper and the player on the end of the line, after having placed a hand(s) on or near the ground (below the knees), moving his hand(s) or making any quick movement; or a lineman other than the snapper wearing number 50 through 79, after having placed a hand(s) on or near the ground (below the knees), moving his hand(s) or making any quick movement (A.R. 7-1-3-VII, VIII, X and XI).

Exception: It is not a false start if any player on the line of scrimmage immediately reacts when threatened by a Team B player in the neutral zone (Rule 7-1-5-a-2) (A.R. 7-1-3-VIII and IX).

- d) An offensive player between the snapper and the player on the end of the line, neither legally in the backfield nor legally on the line of scrimmage, after having placed a hand(s) on or near the ground (below the knees), moving his hand(s) or making any quick movement.
5. An official shall sound his whistle when (A.R. 4-1-4-I):
 - a) There is a false start (A.R. 3-2-6-I and A.R. 7-1-3-VII-IX).
 - b) An offensive player is in or beyond the neutral zone after the snapper touches or simulates (hand[s] at or below his knees) touching the ball.

Note: An infraction of this rule may be penalized whether or not the ball is snapped, and the penalty for any resulting offside by an opponent shall be canceled [S7 and S19].

b. When the snap starts: The offensive team must be in a formation that meets these requirements:

1. At least seven players legally on their scrimmage line, not less than five of whom shall be numbered 50 through 79. The remaining players must be either on their scrimmage line or legally positioned as a back (A.R. 2-27-4-I) [S19].

Exceptions:

Rule 1-4-2-b (A.R. 1-4-2-I).

One player may be between his scrimmage line and the backs if in a position to receive a hand-to-hand snap from between the snapper's legs. When in such position, that player may receive the snap himself or it may go directly to any player legally a back [S19].

2. The player on each side of and next to the snapper may lock legs with the snapper, but any other lineman must have both feet outside the outside foot of the player next to him when the ball is snapped[S19].
3. All players must be inbounds, and only the snapper may be encroaching on the neutral zone; but no part of his person may be beyond the neutral zone, and his feet must be stationary behind the ball [S19].
4. One player may be in motion, but not in motion toward his opponent's goal line. A lineman may not be in motion at the snap. Other players must be stationary in their positions without movement of the feet, body, head or arms [S20] (A.R. 7-1-3-I, III and XII-XIV).

PENALTY -For dead-ball fouls: Five yards from the succeeding spot. For live-ball fouls: Five yards from the previous spot [S7, S19 or S20].

Shifts and False Starts

ARTICLE 4.

- a. If a snap is preceded by a huddle or shift, all players of the offensive team must come to an absolute stop and remain stationary in their positions, without movement of the feet, body, head or arms, for at least one full second before the ball is snapped (A.R. 7-1-4-I) [S20].
- b. It is not intended that Rule 7-1-4-a should prohibit smooth, rhythmical shifts if properly executed. A smooth cadence shift or unhurried motion is not an infraction. However, 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. 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, including but not limited to (A.R. 7-1-4-II-IV):
 1. A lineman moving his foot, shoulder, arm, body or head in a quick, jerky motion in any direction [S19].
 2. The snapper shifting or moving the ball or moving his thumb or fingers, flexing his elbows, jerking his head, or dipping his shoulders or buttocks [S19].
 3. The quarterback "chucking" his hands at the snapper, flexing his elbows under the snapper, jerking his head or dropping his shoulders quickly just before the snap [S19].
 4. A player, before the snap, simulating receiving the ball by "chucking" his hands toward the snapper or quarterback or making any quick, jerky movement that simulates the beginning of a play [S19].

PENALTY -For fouls before the ball is snapped: Five yards from the succeeding spot. For fouls when the ball is snapped: Five yards from the previous spot [S7, S19 or S20].

Defensive Team Requirements

ARTICLE 5. The defensive team requirements are as follows:

- a. After the ball is ready for play and before the ball is snapped:
 1. No player may touch the ball except when moved illegally as in Rule 7-1-3-a-1, nor may any player contact an opponent or in any other way interfere with him. An official shall sound his whistle immediately (A.R. 7-1-5-I-III) [S7 and S18].
 2. No player may enter the neutral zone causing an offensive lineman to react immediately. An official shall sound his whistle immediately [Rules 2-18-2 and 7-1-3-a-4-(c) Exception] (A.R. 7-1-3-VIII and IX) [S7 and S18].
 3. No player shall use words or signals that disconcert opponents when they are preparing to put the ball in play. No player may call defensive signals that simulate the sound or cadence of (or otherwise interfere with) offensive starting signals. An official shall sound his whistle immediately [S7 and S21].
 4. Player(s) aligned in a stationary position within one yard of the line of scrimmage may not make quick or abrupt actions that are not part of normal defensive player movement in an obvious attempt to cause an offensive player(s) to foul (false start). An official shall sound his whistle immediately [S7 and S21].

PENALTY -Dead-ball foul. Five yards from the succeeding spot [S7, S18 or S21].

- b. When the snap starts:
 1. No player may be in or beyond the neutral zone at the snap.
 2. All players must be inbounds.

PENALTY -Live-ball foul. Five yards from the previous spot [S18].

Handing the Ball Forward

ARTICLE 6. No player may hand the ball forward except during a scrimmage down as follows:

- a. A Team A player who is behind his scrimmage line may hand the ball forward to a backfield teammate who is also behind that line.
- b. A Team A player who is behind his scrimmage line may hand the ball forward to a teammate who was on his scrimmage line when the ball was snapped, provided that teammate left his line position by a movement of both feet that faced him toward his own end line and was at least two yards behind his scrimmage line when he received the ball (A.R. 7-1-6-I).

PENALTY -Five yards from the spot of the foul; also loss of a down if by Team A before team possession changes during a scrimmage down [S35 and S9].

Planned Loose Ball

ARTICLE 7. A Team A player may not advance a planned loose ball in the vicinity of the snapper.

PENALTY -Five yards from the previous spot and loss of down [S19 and S9].

SECTION 2. Backward Pass and Fumble

During Live Ball

ARTICLE 1. A runner may hand or pass the ball backward at any time, except to throw the ball intentionally out of bounds to conserve time.

PENALTY -Five yards from the spot of the foul; also loss of down if by Team A before team possession changes during a scrimmage down (A.R. 3-4-3-III) [S35 and S9].

Caught or Recovered

ARTICLE 2. A backward pass or fumble may be caught or recovered by any inbounds player.

- a. If caught, the ball continues in play (A.R. 7-2-2-I and II).

Exceptions:

1. Rule 8-3-2-d-5.
2. When on fourth down, before a change of team possession, a Team A fumble is caught in advance of the fumble by a Team A player other than the fumbler, the ball is dead and returned to the spot of the fumble. If the fumble is caught behind the spot of the fumble by a Team A player other than the Team A fumbler, the ball is dead at that spot.
- b. If recovered by the fumbling or passing team, the ball continues in play (A.R. 2-23-1-I).

Exceptions:

1. Rule 8-3-2-d-5.

2. When on fourth down, before a change of team possession, a Team A fumble is recovered in advance of the fumble by a Team A player other than the fumbler, the ball is dead and returned to the spot of the fumble. If the fumble is recovered behind the spot of the fumble by a Team A player other than the Team A fumbler, the ball is dead at that spot.
- c. If recovered by an opponent of the fumbling team, the ball continues in play.
- d. If recovered by an opponent of the passing team, the ball continues in play.
- e. If a backward pass or fumble is caught or recovered simultaneously by opposing players, the ball becomes dead and belongs to the team last in possession (**Exceptions:** Rules 7-2-2-a Exception 2, 7-2-2-b Exception 2 and 8-3-2-d-5).

After the Ball Is Snapped

ARTICLE 3. No offensive lineman may receive a hand-to-hand snap.

PENALTY -Live-ball foul. Five yards from the previous spot [S19].

Out of Bounds

ARTICLE 4.

- a. When a backward pass goes out of bounds between the goal lines, the ball belongs to the passing team at the out-of-bounds spot; if out of bounds behind a goal line, it is a touchback or a safety.
- b. When a fumble is out of bounds in advance of the spot of the fumble, the ball is returned to the fumbling team at the spot of the fumble. Fumbles out of bounds behind the spot of the fumble belong to the fumbling team at the out-of-bounds spot. If a fumble is out of bounds behind a goal line, it is a touchback or a safety (Rules 8-5-1 and 8-6-1) (A.R. 7-2-4-I, A.R. 8-6-1-I and A.R. 8-7-2-VIII-IX).

At Rest

ARTICLE 5. When a backward pass or fumble comes to rest inbounds and no player attempts to secure it, the ball becomes dead and belongs to the passing or fumbling team at the dead-ball spot.

SECTION 3. Forward Pass

Legal Forward Pass

ARTICLE 1. Team A may make one forward pass during each scrimmage down before team possession changes, provided the pass is thrown from a point in or behind the neutral zone.

Illegal Forward Pass

ARTICLE 2. A forward pass is illegal:

- a. If thrown by a Team A player who is beyond the neutral zone [S35 and S9].
- b. If thrown by a Team B player or if thrown by a Team A player after team possession has changed during the down [S35].
- c. If it is the second forward pass by Team A during the same down [S35 and S9].
- d. If, to conserve time, the pass is not thrown immediately after the ball is first controlled after the snap or is thrown after the ball has touched the ground. If, to conserve time, the pass is thrown where no eligible Team A player has a reasonable opportunity to catch it (A.R. 7-3-2-II-VIII) [S35 and S9].
- e. If thrown from in or behind the neutral zone after a runner in possession of the ball has gone beyond the neutral zone [S35 and S9].

PENALTY -Five yards from the spot of the foul; also loss of down if by Team A before team possession changes during a scrimmage down (A.R. 3-4-3-IV and A.R. 7-3-2-II) [S35 and S9].

- f. If, to save loss of yardage, a forward pass is thrown where no eligible Team A player has a reasonable opportunity to catch it. When in question, the Team A player has a reasonable opportunity to catch the pass (A.R. 7-3-2-I) [S36 and S9].

Exceptions:

1. It is not a foul when the passer, who is five or more yards toward a sideline from the position of the ball at the snap, throws the ball so that it lands in or out of bounds beyond the neutral zone. (A.R. 7-3-2-IX).

2. It is not a foul when the passer, who is five or more yards toward a sideline from the position of the ball at the snap, throws the ball so that it touches a player, an official, or anything beyond the neutral zone.

PENALTY -Loss of down at the spot of the foul [S36 and S9].

Eligibility to Touch Legal Pass

ARTICLE 3. Eligibility rules apply during a down when a legal forward pass is thrown. All Team B players are eligible to touch or catch a pass. When the ball is snapped, the following Team A players are eligible:

- a. Each player who is in an end position on his scrimmage line and who is wearing a number other than 50 through 79 (A.R. 7-3-3-I).
- b. Each player who is legally positioned as a back wearing a number other than 50 through 79.
- c. A player wearing a number other than 50 through 79 in position to receive a hand-to-hand snap from between the snapper's legs.

Eligibility Lost by Going Out of Bounds

ARTICLE 4. No eligible offensive player who goes out of bounds during a down shall touch a legal forward pass in the field of play or end zones or while airborne until it has been touched by an opponent or official (A.R. 7-3-4-I-III).

Exception: This does not apply to an eligible offensive player who attempts to return inbounds immediately after being blocked out of bounds by an opponent (A.R. 7-3-4-IV).

PENALTY -Loss of down at the previous spot [S16 and S9].

Eligibility Gained or Regained

ARTICLE 5. When a Team B player or an official touches a legal forward pass, all players become eligible (A.R. 7-3-5-I).

Completed Pass

ARTICLE 6. Any forward pass is completed when caught by a player of the passing team who is inbounds, and the ball continues in play unless completed in the opponent's end zone or the pass has been caught simultaneously by opposing players. If a forward pass is caught simultaneously by opposing players inbounds, the ball becomes dead and belongs to the passing team (Rule 2-2-7) (A.R. 2-2-7-III and A.R. 7-3-6-I-IX).

Incomplete Pass

ARTICLE 7.

- a. Any forward pass is incomplete when the pass touches the ground or is out of bounds by rule. It also is incomplete when a player leaves his feet and receives the pass but first lands on or outside a boundary line, unless his progress has been stopped in the field of play or end zone (Rule 4-1-3-p) (A.R. 2-2-7-III and A.R. 7-3-7-I).
- b. When a legal forward pass is incomplete, the ball belongs to the passing team at the previous spot.
- c. When an illegal forward pass is incomplete, the ball belongs to the passing team at the spot of the pass (*Exception:* If any illegal pass is thrown from the end zone, the offended team may accept a safety or decline the penalty and accept the result of the play) (A.R. 7-3-7-II-IV).

Illegal Contact and Pass Interference

ARTICLE 8.

- a. During a down in which a legal forward pass crosses the neutral zone, illegal contact by Team A and Team B players is prohibited from the time the ball is snapped until it is touched by any player or an official (A.R. 7-3-8-II and III).
- b. Offensive pass interference by a Team A player beyond the neutral zone during a legal forward pass play in which a forward pass crosses the neutral zone is contact that interferes with a Team B eligible player. It is the responsibility of the offensive player to avoid the opponents. It is not offensive pass interference (A.R. 7-3-8-VI, VII, XIII, XVIII and XIX):
 1. When, after the snap, a Team A ineligible player immediately charges and contacts an opponent at a point not more than one yard beyond the neutral zone and does not continue the contact more than three yards beyond the neutral zone.
 2. When two or more eligible players are making a simultaneous and bona fide attempt to reach, catch or bat the pass. Eligible players of either team have equal rights to the ball (A.R. 7-3-8-XII).

3. When the pass is in flight and two or more eligible players are in the area where they might receive or intercept the pass and an offensive player in that area impedes an opponent, and the pass is not catchable.
- c. Defensive pass interference is contact beyond the neutral zone by a Team B player whose intent to impede an eligible opponent is obvious and it could prevent the opponent the opportunity of receiving a catchable forward pass. When in question, a legal forward pass is catchable. Defensive pass interference occurs only after a legal forward pass is thrown. It is not defensive pass interference (A.R. 7-3-8-I, IV, V, IX-XI, XIV and XV):
 1. When, after the snap, opposing players immediately charge and establish contact with opponents at a point that is within one yard beyond the neutral zone.
 2. When two or more eligible players are making a simultaneous and bona fide attempt to reach, catch or bat the pass. Eligible players of either team have equal rights to the ball (A.R. 7-3-8-XII).
 3. When a Team B player legally contacts an opponent before the pass is thrown (A.R. 7-3-8-XIII).
 4. When a Team A potential kicker, from scrimmage kick formation, simulates a scrimmage kick by throwing the ball high and deep, and contact by a Team B player occurs.

PENALTY -Pass interference by Team A: 15 yards from the previous spot [S33]. Pass interference by Team B: Team A's ball at the spot of the foul, first down, if the foul occurs less than 15 yards beyond the previous spot. If the foul occurs 15 or more yards beyond the previous spot, Team A's ball, first down, 15 yards from the previous spot [S33]. When the ball is snapped between the Team B 17-yard line and the Team B two-yard line and the spot of the foul is beyond the two-yard line, the penalty from the previous spot shall place the ball at the two-yard line, first down (A.R. 7-3-8-XVII). No penalty enforced from outside the two-yard line may place the ball inside the two-yard line (Exception: Rule 10-2-2-g-2). If the previous spot was on or inside the two-yard line, first down halfway between the previous spot and the goal line (Rule 10-2-3 Exception).

Contact Interference

ARTICLE 9.

- a. Either Team A or Team B legally may interfere with opponents behind the neutral zone.
- b. Players of either team legally may interfere beyond the neutral zone after the pass has been touched (A.R. 7-3-9-II).
- c. Defensive players legally may contact opponents who have crossed the neutral zone if the opponents are not in a position to receive a catchable forward pass.
 1. Those infractions that occur during a down when a forward pass crosses the neutral zone are pass interference infractions only if the receiver had the opportunity to receive a catchable forward pass.
 2. Those infractions that occur during a down when a forward pass does not cross the neutral zone are Rule 9-3-4 infractions and are penalized from the previous spot.
- d. Pass interference rules apply only during a down in which a legal forward pass crosses the neutral zone (Rules 2-19-3 and 7-3-8-a and c) (A.R. 10-2-2-XXXVII).
- e. Contact by Team B with an eligible receiver involving a personal foul that interferes with the reception of a catchable pass may be penalized either as pass interference or as a 15-yard personal foul enforced from the previous spot. Rule 7-3-8 is specific about contact during a pass. However, if the interference involves an act that ordinarily would result in disqualification, the fouling player must leave the game.
- f. Physical contact is required to establish interference.
- g. Each player has territorial rights, and incidental contact is ruled under "attempt to reach ...the pass" in Rule 7-3-8. If opponents who are beyond the line collide while moving toward the pass, a foul by one or both players is indicated only if intent to impede the opponent is obvious. It is pass interference only if a catchable forward pass is involved (A.R. 7-3-9-I).
- h. Pass interference rules do not apply after the pass has been touched anywhere inbounds by an inbounds player or has touched an official. If an opponent is fouled, the penalty is for the foul and not pass interference (A.R. 7-3-9-II).

- i. After the pass has been touched, any player may execute a legal block during the remaining flight of the pass.
- j. Tackling or grasping a receiver or any other intentional contact before he touches the pass is evidence that the tackler is disregarding the ball and is therefore illegal.
- k. Tackling or running into a receiver when a forward pass obviously is underthrown or overthrown is disregarding the ball and is illegal. This is not pass interference but a violation of Rule 9-1-2-f and is penalized 15 yards from the previous spot plus a first down. Flagrant offenders shall be disqualified.

Ineligibles Downfield

ARTICLE 10. No originally ineligible receiver shall be or have been beyond the neutral zone until a legal forward pass that crosses the neutral zone has been thrown (A.R. 7-3-10-I and II).

Exceptions:

1. When, after the snap, a Team A ineligible receiver immediately charges and contacts an opponent at a point not more than one yard beyond the neutral zone and does not continue the contact more than three yards beyond the neutral zone.
2. When contact that has driven an opponent no more than three yards from the neutral zone is lost by a player who was ineligible at the snap, he must remain stationary at that spot until the pass is thrown.

PENALTY -Five yards from the previous spot [S37].

Illegal Touching

ARTICLE 11. No originally ineligible player while inbounds shall intentionally touch a legal forward pass until it has touched an opponent or an official (A.R. 5-2-3-I and A.R. 7-3-11-I-III).

PENALTY -Five yards from the previous spot [S16].