

Football Officiating D to F

DOWN & DISTANCE

Every official must know the down and distance before every play. That is as basic to football officiating as knowing the count and number of outs in baseball and softball. Understanding how the game strategy is affected by that information (see “Awareness of game situations”) is only part of the need to know.

If the chains or down box should be dislodged or moved improperly, or if a complicated penalty enforcement leads to confusion, a crew that knew the down and distance before the play can straighten out the situation without guesswork.

A linesman should never have to turn away from the field to see if a play has ended beyond the line-to-gain. Only by knowing the distance before the play can the linesman know if the line-to-gain was reached. That means no turning around, which in turn leads to good dead-ball officiating.

Here’s a play using NFHS rules that demands knowledge of the down. Tie game, 17 seconds on the clock. Team A has the ball, third and 10 on team B’s 27 yardline. Team A decides to go for a field goal. The kick is

blocked behind the line. The ball never crosses the line of scrimmage and is recovered by the kicking team. Because the kick came on third down, the clock should continue to run. Team A would need to call a timeout in order to get another chance at the field goal. If you mistakenly thought the ball was snapped on fourth down, you would likely stop the clock, giving team A an unfair advantage.

EQUIPMENT

The tools of the officiating trade include more than just your uniform and your flags, beanbags and whistle. Games go more smoothly when officials give thought to other game-related equipment.

For instance, the chains and down box should be checked for each game to be sure they're in good shape. A piece of tape wrapped around the links at the mid-point of the chain helps the linesman when a five-yard foul may or may not give team A a first down. For instance, the first play of a series is a running play that gains five and a half yards. On second down, a team B player crosses the neutral zone and contacts a team A player before the snap. The linesman can look at the chain, see that the down box is slightly beyond the tape and tell the referee that the penalty will result in a first down. That prevents a

measurement while still ensuring that team A gets the first down it earned.

The linesman must instruct the chain crew before the game. Some linesmen and many chain crews will give the meeting short shrift because of the experience of the chain gangs or the official. The meeting is important because not every linesman operates in exactly the same way. The meeting should include a reminder to the chain crew regarding safety. If players approach the sideline, the chain crew should be prepared to drop the sticks and move away from the sideline.

At some higher levels of football, the chain crews consist of experienced officials. If you're lucky enough to have such a chain crew in your games, enlist their help. Consider having the person who puts the clip on the chain chart the penalties for your crew. Bring a small clipboard and a chart with spaces listing when the penalty was called, the nature of the foul, which official or officials called it and whether the penalty was accepted or declined. Some conferences or associations require that the report be turned in to a supervisor. Whether or not that is a requirement in your area, the crew can study the information. If you notice that your crew is calling an inordinate number of holding fouls, for instance, a review

of the rules regarding blocking may reveal that some of the calls were unnecessary.

Game balls should be inspected before the game to ensure they are properly inflated. When state high school association rules mandate, the ball must have the NFHS authenticating mark. The goalpost pads and pylons should also be checked to be sure they are properly placed.

This section also refers to player equipment. Before the game, officials should make a casual visual inspection of the players. That can be done while the players are warming up. Issues such as knots in jerseys or tinted eye shields can be corrected or addressed before the game.

FORMATION

In addition to down, distance and other game factors, offensive and defensive formations provide hints as to what type of play an official can expect in a given situation. Most teams using the wishbone formation, for instance, are predominantly running teams. Teams using four-receiver sets and shotgun formations pass more times than not.

Defensive formations are less revealing but still helpful. Although teams generally use one defensive alignment such as a 4-3 (four down linemen and three

linebackers) or 3-4 (three down linemen and four linebackers) as their base defense, the manner in which they deploy players will depend on what scouting or past experience has determined the opposing offense is likely to do in certain situations.

However, observing the safeties and cornerbacks can provide keys. When a defensive back approaches the line of scrimmage as the quarterback is calling signals, he is “showing blitz.” Although teams sometimes fake a blitz, officials can use that key to prepare their coverage for the play. Expect a back to eschew going out for a pass in favor of staying behind the line to help protect the passer. Those blocks can sometimes be double-teams (raising the possibility of a chop block), a cut block (which may be illegal depending on the location of the ball or the players involved when the block occurs) or holds (because not all backs are skilled blockers)

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