

Flag Football Rule Interpretations

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SECTION A - GENERAL RULES

- A-1. In cases not covered by these interpretations, Special Olympics Incorporated (SOI) rules will govern. Rules can be downloaded at [SONA Flag Football Rules 2024](#)
- A-2. Special Olympics Flag Football is non-contact. In all aspects of Special Olympics Flag Football, rulings must be made with player safety as the primary consideration.
- A-3. The Games Rules Committee will make all final decisions.
- A-4. At all times athletes are expected to compete to the best of their ability to ensure quality competition at all levels. Coaches are expected to provide accurate/honest scores of their athletes' ability.
- A-5. The following process will be used for Special Olympics Illinois round robin tournaments:
 - a. The team with the best record at the end of competition will receive first place.
 - b. If all teams have the same record (one win-one loss), places of finish will be determined by the point differential in the games played.
 - c. If the point differential is the same, places of finish will be determined by the total points scored by each team during the tournament (highest scoring team receives first place).
- A-6. In tournament play, the game will be forfeited if a team fails to report to the field, ready to play within ten (10) minutes of the scheduled game time.
- A-7. The score of a forfeited game is 2-0 if the game has not started. If the forfeit happens before the first half is completed and the leading team is forfeited to, the score stands. If the losing team is forfeited the score is 2-0. If the forfeit takes place in the second half the score is based on the score at half time. If the team leading at half is forfeited to, the half time score stands. If the team losing at half is awarded the forfeit, the score is 2-0.
- A-8. Teams must receive a gold or silver medal from a Region Qualifier to attend the State Flag Football Tournament. Teams must submit an Intent to Play, Team Rating Form and play 3 games prior to the Region Qualifier. See Criteria for Advancement for specific requirements.

SECTION B – UNIFORMS AND EQUIPMENT

- B-1. No advertising or sponsorship is allowed to be worn on competition uniforms or warm-ups. Athletes will not be allowed to wear jewelry or awards during competition. No jeans, jean shorts or street shoes will be allowed to be worn during the competition. No metal spikes, hiking boots, or other equipment deemed dangerous by officials will be allowed. Athletes will be expected to dress appropriately for the weather and competition. Athletes not in the proper attire will be disqualified.

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- B-2. All participants must have matching shirts with matching numbers on the front and back which must be tucked in at the waist to avoid obstruction of flag pulling. Shorts/pants must be of contrasting color to flags and cannot have pockets.
 - B-3. A protective mouthpiece must be worn at all times.
 - B-4. A one-piece, three-flag Triple Threat belt will be worn by all players, at all times during games. Flag belts must be a contrasting color to the uniform shorts/pants.
 - B-5. An intermediate/youth-sized football will be used in all divisions.

SECTION C - TEAM AND PLAYERS

- C-1. The team roster may contain a maximum of twelve (12) players.
- C-2. Teams must field five (5) players to start the game (required). Teams may continue with a minimum of four (4) players, if necessary due to disqualification or injury. The game may be continued with fewer players as long as the team has a chance to win (at the discretion of game officials)
- C-3. Substitutions (Athlete for Athlete or Partner for Partner) – Any player on the roster may enter upon the completion of a play. Each substitute must play at least one (1) down prior to being replaced. A replaced player must leave the field immediately.
- C-4. No players may be added to or replaced on the roster after the Team Rating Form (TRF) is submitted. All team members must be listed on the team roster.
- C-5. Unified Flag Football teams must have a non-playing coach responsible for the line-up and conduct of the team during competition.
- C-6. Unified Sports roster must contain a proportionate number of athletes and partners and have at least three (3) athletes and two (2) partners. During competition, teams must field five (5) players to start the game. The line-up must never exceed three (3) athletes and two (2) partners at any time. Teams may continue with a minimum of four (4) players (minus 1 partner or athlete) due to disqualification or injury. Failure to adhere to the required ratio results in a forfeit.
- C-7. Unified Partners as quarterbacks may NOT pass to another partner, however partners MAY handoff to another partner. Partners must NOT dominate play.

SECTION D – AGE GROUPS AND DIVISIONS

- D-1. When possible, all teams will be placed in either junior or senior divisions determined by the age (as of the year of event) of the oldest player listed on the official roster.

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- D-2. Divisions at the region and state level will be determined by team rating forms and game scores submitted by coaches. Safety considerations will be made with placement of teams. All teams will be placed with ability levels as a priority.
 - D-3. Coed teams will play in a male division.
 - D-4. Teams deemed not ready for competition by Special Olympics Illinois staff can be put into a developmental division and will not be allowed to advance to the next level of competition. In the developmental division scrimmage situations will be used and athletes will be awarded a participation ribbon. Coaches will be allowed on the field to assist athletes as they learn the game.

SECTION E – THE GAME

- E-1. Flag Football is a non-contact sport. All aspects of Flag Football rulings must be made with players' safety as the primary consideration.
- E-2. Points of Emphasis - No team will repeatedly commit penalties halving the distance to the goal line. No team will commit any act which, in the opinion of the referee, tends to make a travesty of the game. This includes intentionally committing penalties to gain an advantage. The referee will enforce any penalty they consider equitable, including the award of a score for an unfair act.
- E-3. A coin toss will determine first possessions. Each team will provide two (2) captains three (3) minutes prior to the contest to conduct the coin toss. The winner of the coin toss will choose offense, defense, or end of the field to defend. The winning team may defer its choice to the second half.
- E-4. All possessions, except for an interception, start from the offensive team's 5-yard line. The offense has four (4) plays to cross mid-field. Once the offense crosses mid-field, they have four (4) additional plays to score a touchdown. If the offense fails to cross mid-field or score a touchdown in a prescribed number of plays, possession of the ball changes and the opposite team starts at their 5-yard line.
- E-5. A touchdown is six (6) points, extra point (decided by coach) is one (1) point from the 6-yard line or two (2) points from the 12 yard line (or any distance outside of the 5 yards due to a penalty). A safety is two (2) points.
- E-6. Beginning with the 2025 season, interceptions are allowed to be returned for positive yards by the intercepting player (except if Mercy Rule is in effect).
- E-7. A "Mercy Rule" will be used in all levels of play. The rule is only used in the second half of a game. It takes effect when one team is ahead by 25 points or more. When the Mercy Rule is in effect:

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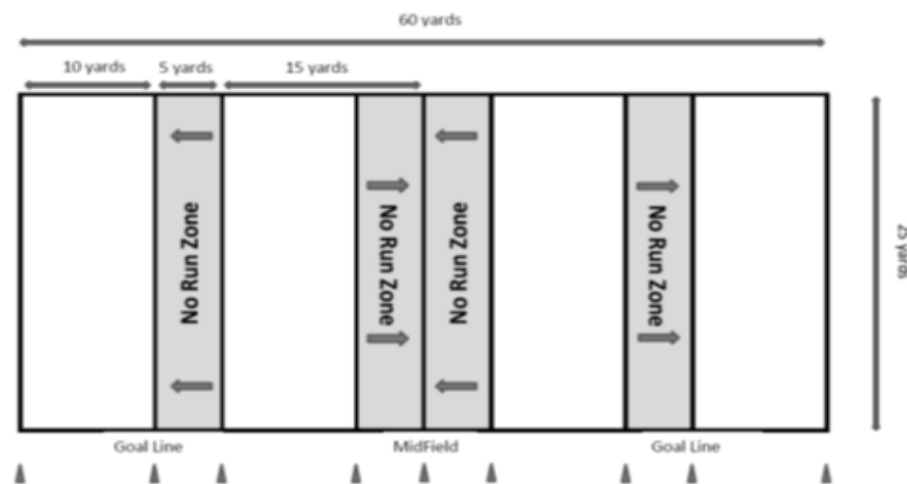
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- a. The clock becomes a running clock, stopping only for time-outs replacing a disqualified player, an injury or a correctable error. The clock continues to run in the last minute of the half.
- b. The winning team is not allowed to return interceptions.
- c. The winning team is not allowed to rush the quarterback.
- d. Regardless of the score, the Mercy Rule stays in effect once it is invoked.

SECTION F – FIELD OF PLAY

- F-1. The playing field is 60 yards long (including the end zones) and 25 yards wide. A space of at least 5 yards around the field must be free and clear of obstructions. The field can be marked with chalk, paint, and/or traffic cones.
- F-2. Stepping on a boundary line is considered out of bounds.
- F-3. No-Run Zones are in place to prevent teams from conducting power running plays. In the No-Run Zones (a 5 yard zone before midfield and before the end zone), teams cannot run the ball in any fashion. All plays must be pass plays, even with a handoff.
- F-4. Each offensive team approaches only TWO (2) No-Run Zones in each drive (a 5 yard zone before midfield to gain the first down and before the end zone, 5 yards from the goal line to score a TD).



- F-5. Each team has a designated bench area and all coaches and athletes must stay within the bench area at all times except during official time outs and half time. The bench area is from the midfield (20 yard line) to the 5 yard line of a team's assigned half of the field.
- F-6. Coaches are only allowed on the field of play during a time out, half time or if summoned onto the field by an official. Coaches are not allowed on the field of play

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between plays or during game play. Violations of this rule result in an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty.

SECTION G – DURATION OF GAME AND OVERTIME

- G-1.** Standard Timing will be used in all levels of play. The game will consist of two (2) 20 minute halves (running clock) until the last (1) minute of each half (unless Mercy Rule is in effect). During the last (1) minute of each half, the clock:
- a. Stops for: incomplete passes, scoring plays, changes of possession, out of bounds or first downs.
 - b. Restart clock on the snap.
 - c. Clock does NOT start for extra point attempts (untimed down).
 - d. If Mercy Rule is in effect, then clock will not stop in last (1) minute of second half.
- G-2.** Officials can stop the clock at their discretion for injuries or delays.
- G-3.** The clock will stop on all time outs. Each team receives two (2) 60 second time outs per game.
- G-4.** The ball must be put in play promptly and legally and any action or lack of action by either team that tends to prevent this is considered a delay of game. This includes:
- e. Interrupting the 30 second count for any reason except for a granted time out.
 - f. Consuming more than the 30 seconds snap the ball after it is ready for play.
 - g. Failing to remove an injured player for whose benefit an excess time out has been granted.
 - h. Deliberately advancing the ball after it has been declared dead.
- G-5.** Overtime – if the score is tied at the end of regulation play:
- a. A coin toss is held to determine first possession.
 - b. Each team receives two (2) plays from midfield and the team gaining the most points or yardage advantage is awarded one (1) extra point and wins the game.
 - c. If an interception occurs the team that intercepts the ball automatically wins the game.
 - d. If the team with the first attempt in overtime scores on the first play, the opposing team must score on its first play also. If both teams score a touchdown, or gain the same yardage, the procedure is repeated until one team wins.

SECTION H – LIVE BALL / DEAD BALL

- H-1.** The ball must be snapped between the Center's legs or to the side to start each play.
- H-2.** There are no fumbles. Any ball that hits the ground will immediately stop play.
- H-3.** Play is ruled dead when:
- a. The ball carrier's flag is pulled

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- b. The ball carrier's loses his/her flag
 - c. The ball carrier steps out of bounds
 - d. Any part of the ball carrier's body other than the feet or hands touches the ground.
 - e. A touchdown, extra point, or safety is scored
 - f. When during a try-for-point the defense obtains possession of the ball
 - g. When a forward pass strikes the ground or is caught simultaneously by opposing players (the offense retains possession)
 - h. A receiver catches a ball without his/her flags attached
 - i. A snapped ball touches the ground
 - j. If fumbled forward, the ball is spotted where the ball carrier's feet were at the time of the fumble. If ball falls backwards, it is marked where it hits the ground
 - k. When there is an inadvertent whistle
 - l. When Mercy Rule is in effect: A pass is intercepted by the winning team (no returns)
- H-4.** In case of an inadvertent whistle, the team in possession of the ball may choose to accept the result of the play at the point where the play was blown dead or choose to re-play the down.
- H-5.** No member of the offensive team may simulate the start of the play before the ball is snapped or a False Start will be penalized.

SECTION I – RUNNING

- I-1.** Handing off the ball is transferring player possession from one teammate to another without kicking or throwing it. All hand-offs behind the line of scrimmage are acceptable.
- I-2.** The Quarterback (first player gaining possession of the snap) cannot advance the ball across the line of scrimmage. Only direct hand-offs behind the line of scrimmage are legal. Laterals or pitches (known as backward passes) of any kind are not allowed.
- I-3.** In Unified Sports, a partner may hand off to a partner behind the line of scrimmage.
- I-4.** The player who takes the hand-off can pass the ball, as long as they do not pass the line of scrimmage.
- I-5.** "No Running Zones" are located 5-yards before the mid-field line and goal line. Any ball snapped from these zones must be passed. The purpose of the "No Running Zones" is to avoid short yardage power running situations.
- I-6.** The ball carrier may not dive, hurdle, stiff arm, or use either arm to shield a defender from grasping their flag.

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- I-7. The ball is marked at the spot where the position of the ball is when the player is declared down (carrier's flag belt is pulled or any part of the ball carrier's body other than the feet or hands touches ground).
 - I-8. Hurdling, jumping over or attempting to jump over a player, by the ball carrier, to prevent from being downed or to gain additional yardage is illegal. Jumping over a player who is on the ground to avoid injury, by official's judgment, is legal.
 - I-9. Runners must not shield (flag guard) by using their hands, arms, or the ball to deny the opportunity for an opponent to pull or remove their flag belt. This includes swinging the hand or arm over the flag belt, stiff arms, placing the ball in a possession over the flag belt, lowering shoulders or arm over the flag belt, or hurdling.
 - I-10. The offense may use multiple handoffs behind the line of scrimmage.
 - I-11. Center Sneak – The ball must completely leave the center's hands on the snap and they must step backwards off the line of scrimmage in order to receive the direct handoff from the quarterback/offensive player before advancing the ball.

SECTION J – PASSING / RECEIVING

- J-1. All passes must be forward and received beyond the line of scrimmage. Shovel passes are allowed but must be received beyond the line of scrimmage.
- J-2. All players are eligible to receive a forward pass, including the Quarterback, if they have legally handed-off. Exception: In Unified Sports, if a partner throws a pass, only athletes are eligible receivers. Failure to "self-patrol" will be considered unsportsmanlike and will be penalized accordingly.
- J-3. A player must have at least one foot in bounds when making a catch.
- J-4. Beginning with the 2025 season, interceptions are allowed to be returned for positive yards by the intercepting player (except if Mercy Rule is in effect).
 - a. If Mercy Rule is in effect, then the winning team is not allowed to return an interception for positive yards. The ball is dead at the spot of the interception.
 - b. If the ball is intercepted in the end zone, then the intercepting player can return the ball or indicate a touchback. If it is a touchback then the intercepting player must clearly show they are not returning the ball (take a knee).
- J-5. Diving – a defensive or offensive player may dive to catch a pass. Diving is illegal when used to down a player or advance the ball. A player cannot dive or attempt to gain extra yardage. The team will be penalized accordingly.

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SECTION K – SCREEN BLOCKING

- K-1. Screen blocking is legally obstructing an opponent without contacting them with any part of the screen blocker's body. Their arms must be fully extended to the ground (below the waist) either at their side, in front, across the chest or behind their back. Any use of arms, elbows, legs, or shoulders to initiate contact during the screen block is illegal.
- K-2. A player must be on their feet before, during, or after screen blocking.
- K-3. Screen blocking is the only form of legal blocking that can be used by any player at any time.
- K-4. Backfield Blocking: if any of the following provisions are violated, and contact results, the screener has committed an illegal block.
 - a. The screen blocker must give at least one step.
 - b. The screen blocker must not initiate contact with opponent.
 - c. The screen blocker may not take a position so close to a moving opponent that this opponent cannot avoid contact by stopping or changing directions.
 - d. After the snap of the ball, a blocker may move laterally or backward two steps.
- K-5. Downfield Blocking: A basketball style (non-moving) screen is the only acceptable form of downfield blocking. The blocker also may not run between a rusher and the ball carrier impeding a defender's progress to the flag.

SECTION L – FORMATIONS

- L-1. The line of scrimmage for each team is a vertical plane through the point of the ball nearest the team's goal line. Each player on a team must be on its side of the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped.
- L-2. Only one player of the offensive team may be in motion at the snap. This player must not be moving towards its goal line at the time the ball is snapped. This player may motion in front of or behind the quarterback. If the player comes to a stop they must be set for one second.
- L-3. A shift is the action of one or more offensive players who after taking set positions move to a new position prior to the snap. A player who shifts must reset for one second prior to the snap.

SECTION M – RUSHING THE PASSER

- M-1. All players who rush the Quarterback must be a minimum of 7-yards from the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped. A special marker, placed by the official, will designate the spot 7-yards from the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped.

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- If a rusher crossed the rush line early (within 7-yards from the line of scrimmage at snap), they may return to the rush line, reset, and then legally rush the quarterback.

M-2. Players not rushing the Quarterback may defend the line of scrimmage.

M-3. Once the Quarterback hands off the ball, the 7-yard zone no longer exists, and all defenders are eligible to rush.

SECTION N – FLAG PULLING

N-1. A legal flag pull takes place when the ball carrier is in full possession of the ball.

N-2. It is illegal to strip the ball from the carrier's possession at any time (penalty).

N-3. If a player's flag belt inadvertently falls off during the play, the player is down immediately upon possession of the ball and the play ends.

N-4. A defensive player may not intentionally pull the flags off of a player who is not in possession of the ball (penalty).

N-5. A player is not allowed to tie their flag. Officials will check the flag of a scoring player after every score to ensure the flag is not tied. If a flag is found to be tied on a scoring play then the score will not count and a 5 Yard Guarding Penalty is assessed on the first infraction. If there are any repeat offenses by the same team in the same game then Unsportsmanlike Conduct Penalties will be assessed on each subsequent infraction.

SECTION O – PENALTIES

O-1. All penalties are automatically accepted (no declination). However, the official has judgement to decline the penalty if the result of the play is better than the penalty.

O-2. All penalties are assessed from the line of scrimmage.

O-3. No penalty may take the ball more than half the distance to the offender's goal line.

O-4. Offense: 5-yards from the line of scrimmage and loss of down

- a. Illegal motion (more than one player moving at the snap, moving forward at snap)
- b. Offside (in neutral zone at snap, false start)
- c. Illegal forward/backward pass (pass not completed beyond the line of scrimmage; illegal backward pass; partner to partner; QB pass beyond line of scrimmage)
- d. Illegal Procedure (quarterback run)
- e. Pass Interference (picking or pushing defender)

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- f. Illegal Contact (holding, blocking, bumping, stiff arming)
 - g. Flag Guarding (diving, warding off, hurdling)
 - h. Delay of Game (failing to snap within 30 second of ready)
 - i. Flag Tying (tying/securing flag so cannot be pulled off)
 - O-5. Defense:** 5-yards from the line of scrimmage and automatic first down
 - a. Offside (in or beyond neutral zone at snap)
 - b. Pass Interference
 - c. Illegal Contact (holding, blocking, bumping, stripping)
 - d. Illegal Flag Pull (before receiver has ball)
 - e. Illegal Rushing (rushing Quarterback inside 7-yard line)
 - f. Delay of Game (Disconcerting signals or other illegal action that causes delay)
 - O-6. Unsportsmanlike Conduct – no warnings are required**
 - a. Unsportsmanlike Offense: 10-yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down
 - b. Unsportsmanlike Defense: 10-yards from line of scrimmage and automatic first down
 - c. The officials will disqualify any player who participates in rough or unsportsmanlike play.
 - d. During possession, it is illegal for a defensive player to strip or pull the ball from the ball carrier at any time.
 - e. Ball carriers **MUST** make an effort to avoid defenders with an established position.
 - f. Defenders are not allowed to run through the ball carrier when pulling flags.
 - g. Repeat offenses of flag tying.
 - h. Non-registered personnel (coaches, athletes, Unified partners, bus drivers, spectators, etc.) on the team bench or in the team bench area.
 - i. Coaches on the field when not allowed.