

Unnecessary / Excessive Contact & 10-2-5-b Clarification

To all officials: I am requesting that each of you spend some quality time as an individual official, as a crew, and as a local association and carefully consider and discuss the information in this document as it relates to two of our new rule changes for 2015. My intention is to have every official read and hear the same message concerning these changes in an effort to have everyone thinking along the same lines and hopefully have everyone on the same page.

Rule 9-4-3-g clearly states that no player shall make contact against an opponent that is unnecessary and / or excessive and it includes specific reference to defenseless players. So what is unnecessary and what is excessive in the game of football? I would like to share 5 factors for you to consider and discuss as they relate to the answer to our question.

- 1.) What OPTIONS did the player have as he/she prepared to make contact with an opponent? I strongly believe that in a significant majority of the times that a player chooses to make contact with an opponent who we would describe as a defenseless player, he/she is in complete control of themselves and in a position to do whatever they choose to that opponent. I would suggest to you that we must hold the player in that situation to a much higher standard in his/her decision-making process as it relates to football safety. A player in that situation quickly loses any 'benefit-of-the-doubt' for a poor decision in my mind. Spearing and targeting are no-brainers and must be flagged, period.
- 2.) WHEN did the player make the questionable contact with the opponent in relation to the play in progress? What was happening, what had already occurred, and was the end of the down imminent or possibly already finished?
- 3.) WHERE on the football field did the player make the questionable contact with the opponent in relation to the critical action near the location of the ball? This factor of course suggests the use of the phrase "completely out-of-the-play" as it relates to a player's location on the field.
- 4.) HOW did the player choose to make contact with his/her opponent? It would certainly be possible at this point to describe many different types of contact such as using the shoulder launch or thrust into the upper torso of the opponent or a simple open-hand push to the opponent near the base of the jersey numbers, etc. I trust that each of you will agree with me that we are therefore looking at various degrees of player safety issues.
- 5.) WHERE on the opponent's body did the player make the questionable contact as it relates to player safety? I suspect that you will agree that item #4 and item #5 are certainly closely related. Once again, it is appropriate to remind all officials that there are clear examples of contact to the opponent that create a definite foul.

What then is 'unnecessary' contact against the opponent? At this point, I would suggest that factors 1, 2, and 3 are the critical issues to be considered when you observe questionable contact as it relates to player safety. I strongly suggest that #1 shall always be considered and that #2 and #3 are also important as we make the critical decisions about throwing the flag. Unfortunately we do not have a nice, neat answer that always works for when to 'pull the trigger', but I would suggest that these factors should be helpful in determining what to do at the critical moment of contact. Contact that is "completely out-of-the-play" quickly loses any 'benefit-of-the-doubt' in my mind.

What then is 'excessive' contact against the opponent? I will quickly suggest that this question is probably more difficult to answer than the other, but officials are expected to be prepared for that moment when a player makes a poor decision as it relates to player safety and be ready to make a tough decision. Once again, I will always consider factor #1 first and foremost and will suggest to you that factors #4 and #5 become equally important to this critical question. I really wish we had a nice, neat answer for this one as well, but we don't and we are obligated as officials to make some important decisions to protect the safety of the game. My final comment on this question would be that the closer the contact is to the head area, the higher the probability that we choose to 'pull the trigger'.

You are also encouraged at this point to carefully read the Points of Emphasis comments on pages 92 & 93 along with the Referee magazine Preseason Guide in your packet that address this issue. It is quite clear that blindside blocks, peel-back blocks, and airborne receivers must heighten our awareness regarding the defenseless player issues. Legal contact in these situations is certainly possible, but we must pay real close attention.

I sure hope this helps in some small way to get everyone thinking along the same lines as we begin to work another season. This safety issue is not going away anytime soon and it is our responsibility to address it as best we can. Once again, do not pass on spearing and targeting. Throw the flag!!!

I also want to provide clarification to the phrase in 10-2-5-b that states "prior to the completion of penalty administration for those fouls". I believe there are 3 stages of penalty administration (1. the referee's physical signal; 2. the umpire placing the ball at the succeeding spot after the walk-off; and 3. the possible movement of the chain.) An equal number of 15-yard dead-ball fouls that occur prior to these 3 stages happening will offset. If one of them happens prior to and the other happens following the completion of all 3 stages, they would not offset. This sequence does not involve the next ready-for-play signal. It does involve the completion of the 3 stages of penalty administration. This should prevent any possible movement of the chain back to a previous location.