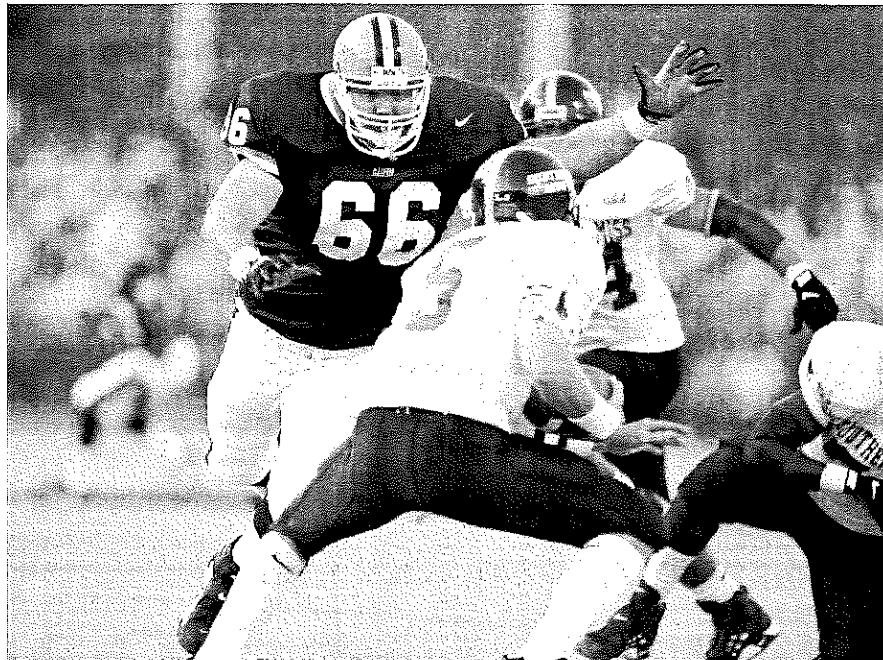


# 18

## Football



**A**merican football evolved from rugby, which was a spin-off from soccer. Early roots of the modern game can be traced to a college game played in 1869 between Princeton and Rutgers universities. Each team had 25 men on the field; the game more resembled soccer than football, as running with the ball, passing, and tackling were not allowed. Harvard and McGill universities played a game in 1874 that combined elements of rugby and soccer; this game caught on in eastern U.S. schools and developed into the beginnings of modern football.

Early rules included playing with a round ball and needing to make 5 yards in three downs. Rules have continually evolved to make the game fair, exciting, and less violent. From its beginnings in America on college campuses, football has grown into a widely popular sport in the United States, where it is played in youth leagues, in high schools, and professionally. Football rules are played all over the world, although it is not a great spectator sport outside the United States. There is a National Football League (NFL) Europe league, made up mostly of American

players, with rules basically the same as in the NFL in the United States.

The rules in this chapter are general football rules, with specific references to both National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules and NFL rules. Important modifications for other levels and variations of the sport are addressed near the end of the chapter. It is important to note that different rules apply for high school, college, and pro levels.

**Objective:** To score the most points via touchdowns, extra points, field goals, and safeties.

**Number of Players:** 11 per team on the field.

**Scoring:** A touchdown is worth six points; teams can try for one-point (kicking) or two-point (running a play from scrimmage) conversions after a touchdown; a field goal is worth three points; a safety is worth two.

**Length of Game:** Four 15-minute quarters in the NFL and college; four 12-minute quarters in high school.

**Overview:** The team on offense tries to advance the ball down the field and score a touch-

down by crossing the goal line with the ball or, alternatively, to kick a field goal through the goal posts. The team on defense tries to regain possession of the ball by intercepting a pass in the air, recovering a fumble, stopping the offense from making 10 yards in four downs (plays), or forcing the offense to punt (kick) the ball to them.

## FIELD

The *playing field* is 53.33 yards wide by 120 yards long (see figure 18.1). The length of the field is marked by boundary lines called *sidelines*. The end zones, located at both ends of the field, are 10 yards deep, bordered by a goal line in front and an end line in back. The two goal lines are 100 yards apart. Any part of the goal line is considered part of the end zone; any part of the end line and the sideline that borders the end zone is considered out of bounds.

The front and back corners of the end zones are marked with pylons. These pylons are out-of-bounds. The field is lined, width-wise, at intervals of 5 yards; along the sidelines each

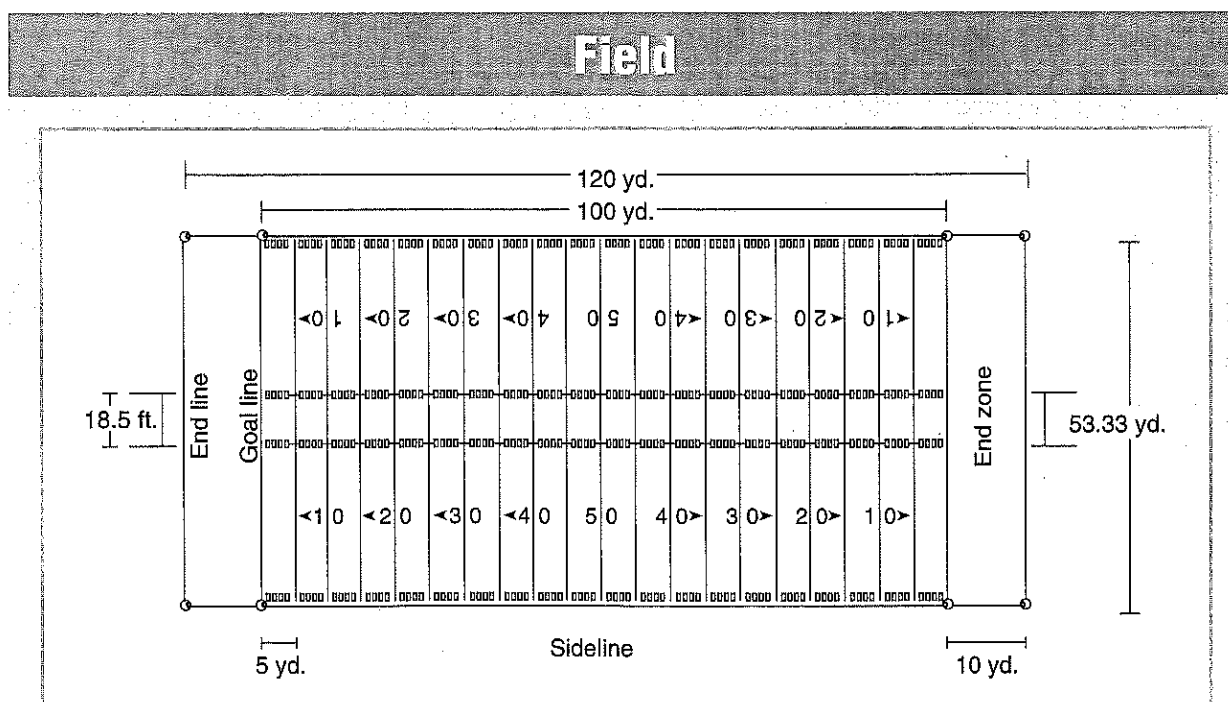


Figure 18.1 The dimensions and features of a high school football field.

Adapted from the National Football League 1994.

yard is marked. Yard lines are numbered every 10 yards in multiples of 10; these numbers are 2 yards long. Inbounds lines, or *hash marks*, run parallel to the yard lines. Hash marks are set 70.75 feet from each sideline in professional football and 53.25 feet from each sideline in college football.

*Goal posts* are at the back of each end zone, with a horizontal crossbar 18.5 feet in length and 10 feet above the ground. The crossbar is directly above the end line. Two vertical posts extend 30 feet above the crossbar and are topped by ribbons measuring 4 inches by 42 inches.

## TERMS

Following are brief explanations for terms that are not described elsewhere in this chapter.

A **dead ball** occurs when a ball carrier is downed or out of bounds, when a quarterback drops to his knee, when a ball carrier slides feet first, when a ball carrier is held or otherwise restrained so that his forward progress is stopped, when a pass drops incomplete, when a kick receiver does not attempt to run out a kick from the end zone, when a fair catch is made, when a field goal attempt passes the crossbar, or when an official sounds his whistle. When the ball is dead, the play is over.

A **free kick** happens when a kick is "free" (undefended) during a kickoff and after a safety. A team may also choose to free kick immediately following a fair catch of a punt. A free kick may be a drop kick, place kick, or punt. This is true for high school and pro football, but not college.

A **fumble** occurs when a player loses possession of the ball while the play is still in progress.

During a kickoff, the kicking team may put on a play—an **onside kick**—to retain possession of the ball. The kick must travel 10 yards or first touch a player on the receiving team before the kicking team can recover the ball.

A player or a ball is **out of bounds** when either has touched a boundary line (or touched ground beyond the boundary line).

**Special teams** is a term used for the units on the field during kickoffs, placekicks, and punts.

A **touchback** occurs when a ball is dead on or behind a team's own goal line, provided the ball's impetus came from an opponent and it is not a touchdown.

## PLAYERS

Offensive and defensive units have 11 players each. Player positions are designated depending on the system and terminology employed by the coach. Generally speaking, on offense, players are the quarterback, running backs, wide receivers, tight end, and offensive linemen (center, tackles, and guards).

On defense, players are generally identified as defensive linemen (ends and tackles), linebackers, and defensive backs (cornerbacks and safeties).

Special teams are the units on the field when kicking takes place—during a kickoff, a field goal attempt, a point-after conversion attempt, or a punt. Primary among these players are the holder (who receives the snap and holds the ball for the placekicker), the placekicker (who kicks field goals and extra points), the punter, and the kick returners (who return kickoffs and punts).

Substitutes may enter a game during a dead ball (when play is out). A player is not limited to a certain number of times he may enter a game, but neither team may have more than 11 players on the field at the snap of the ball.

## PLAY

Before the game, the winner of a coin toss either opts to receive the kickoff or chooses which goal his team will defend. At the end of the first and third periods, the teams change goals. To start the second half, the team that lost the pregame coin toss chooses between the same two privileges.

The game begins with a kickoff at the kicking team's 30-yard line in the NFL, 35-yard line in college, or 40-yard line in high school play. All players on the kicking team must be behind the yard line from which the ball is kicked, and all

players on the receiving team must be no closer than 10 yards away from the kickoff line.

If the kickoff goes out of bounds without being touched by a receiver, the receiving team may elect to take the ball either where it went out of bounds or 30 yards beyond the kickoff line. If the kick touches a receiver and then goes out of bounds, the receiving team puts the ball into play at the yard line where the ball went out of bounds.

Each team normally huddles before a play, to call the play and coverage. (Sometimes an offensive team will go without a huddle and go directly to the line of scrimmage, where the quarterback will call the play through coded signals.) The players line up on the line of scrimmage before the snap of the ball. The offensive team must have at least seven players on its line at the snap. Offensive players not on the line must be at least 1 yard behind it.

After the ball is snapped, the offensive team may advance the ball by running with or passing it. While a team may only attempt one forward pass during a down, it may attempt multiple backward passes or laterals. Backward passes may be advanced by both teams even if the ball touches the ground before a receiver secures possession.

An airborne NFL receiver must come down with *both feet in bounds* (on the ground in the playing field) while in possession of the ball in order to record a legal reception. At other levels, *only one foot needs to be in bounds*. In the NFL and in high school, if a receiver is pushed out of bounds but would have landed inbounds otherwise, the catch is allowed.

In the NFL, a ball carrier may fall and get back up and continue running if he is not tackled or touched by a defender while on the ground. In amateur play, once a runner touches any part of his body to the ground, except for his hands and feet, he is considered down.

During each play, offensive players attempt to block defenders to protect the passer and ball carrier. The defense attempts to tackle the ball carrier or knock him out of bounds, or to intercept or knock down a pass. A defender records a sack when he tackles the quarterback for a loss of yardage during a pass attempt.

The offensive team has four downs, or plays, to advance 10 yards from the line of scrimmage at the first down. A team may, in certain instances, be awarded a first down (a new set of four downs) on a defensive penalty, even if the necessary 10 yards are not made.

In many cases if a team has not made a first down in three plays, it will punt (kick) the ball to the opponents on the fourth down. The player receiving the punt may attempt to catch and advance the ball, let it roll dead (it may not be recovered by the kicking team if it does not touch a player on the receiving team), or call for a fair catch by waving a hand above his helmet. The kicking team may not touch a player who has signaled for a fair catch, unless the player fumbles.

## SCORING

A player scores a touchdown (six points) when he possesses the ball and the ball touches the plane of, or crosses over, the opponent's goal line. A touchdown can be made by running with the ball, by catching a pass, or by recovering a fumble on or over the opponent's goal line. The defense may intercept a pass, return a kick, or recover a fumble or blocked punt and return it for a touchdown.

After a touchdown is scored, a team has the choice of attempting a one-point or two-point try, or conversion. In the NFL, the ball is placed at the 2-yard line for a conversion attempt; in amateur football, the ball is placed at the 3-yard line. A one-point conversion is scored by kicking the ball through the uprights. A two-point conversion is scored by an offensive player possessing the ball on or over the goal line (in what normally would be considered a touchdown).

A field goal (three points) is scored by place-kicking or dropkicking the ball through the opponent's goal post uprights (though dropkicking is rare in modern football). If the kick is no good and the ball is beyond the opponent's 20-yard line, the ball is given to the opponents at the line of scrimmage. If the unsuccessful kick was attempted from on or inside the 20-yard line, the ball is given to the opponents at

the 20-yard line. If, however, the kick is blocked and recovered by the opponents, the ball goes to the opponents at the spot where the ball is downed, regardless of the yard line.

A safety (two points) is scored when the defense tackles behind the opponent's own goal line. A safety is also scored if the offense maintains possession of the ball out of bounds on or behind its own goal line. Examples of safeties are a runner or quarterback being tackled in his own end zone or a punt being blocked and going out of bounds beyond the goal line. Following a safety, the team that was just scored upon kicks off from its own 20-yard line.

## FOULS AND PENALTIES

Many rules in football are geared for safety. On the following pages are brief explanations of common violations, listed in alphabetical order, that result in penalties. The length of the penalty appears at the end of each listing.

- **Batting or kicking the ball:** A player may not bat a ball toward the opponent's end zone or bat a ball in any direction in the end zone. Although stripping the ball (raking the ball from the player's grasp) is legal, attempting to bat the ball in a player's possession is not legal. Neither is kicking any loose ball or ball in a player's possession. *10 yards*

- **Defensive holding:** No defensive player can tackle or hold an opponent other than the ball carrier. *10 yards*

- **Delay of game:** A team must put the ball into play in the allotted time (40 seconds from the end of the previous play, or 25 seconds after a timeout, measurement, injury, or other delay). *5 yards*

- **Double (offsetting) foul:** When live-ball fouls are committed by both teams, the penalties offset each other, and the down is replayed at the previous spot.

- **Encroachment:** No part of a player's body may be in the neutral zone and no contact may occur before the ball is snapped. The neutral zone is a space the length of the ball

between the offense's and defense's scrimmage lines. *5 yards*

- **Fair catch interference:** A player signaling for a fair catch of a punt must be given the opportunity to make the catch before the ball hits the ground. No contact may be made by a defender unless the ball has touched the receiver or touched the ground. *15 yards*

- **False start:** A false start occurs when an offensive player, once in the set position, moves in such a way as to signify the snap of the ball. *5 yards*

- **Helping a runner:** No offensive player can assist a runner (other than blocking for the runner) or use *interlocking interference* to aid a runner. Helping a runner includes pushing him or lifting him. *10 yards in NFL play; 5 yards in NCAA play*

- **Illegal contact:** A defender may make contact with an offensive receiver who is in front of him and within 5 yards of the line of scrimmage. Beyond 5 yards, or if the receiver has moved beyond the defender, the defender may not make contact that impedes or restricts the receiver. Incidental contact is legal, as long as it does not significantly impede the progress of the receiver or create a distinct advantage for the defender. *15 yards and automatic first down*

- **Illegal forward pass:** A team may make one forward pass from behind the line of scrimmage (a player with the ball may not cross the line of scrimmage and then retreat behind it and throw a pass). Any other forward pass is illegal with penalties as follows: for passing from a point beyond the line of scrimmage—*5 yards from the spot of the pass and loss of down*; for a second forward pass thrown, or for a pass thrown after the ball was returned behind the line of scrimmage—*loss of down from the previous spot*; for a forward pass not from scrimmage—*loss of 5 yards from the spot of the pass*.

- **Illegal motion:** Only one offensive player—a backfield player—may be in motion before the snap. The motion can be parallel to, or backward from, the line of scrimmage. Any other motion by other players—including movement of head, arms, or feet and swaying of the body—is illegal. *5 yards*

- **Ineligible player downfield:** Before a pass is thrown, an offensive lineman (unless he is designated as an eligible receiver) may not lose contact with an opponent and advance beyond the line of scrimmage. *5 yards*

- **Intentional grounding:** A passer may not throw an incomplete pass without a realistic chance of completing it in order to avoid being tackled. (A quarterback may stop the clock, however, by receiving a snap and immediately throwing the ball to the ground in front of him.) *loss of down 15 yards from previous spot*

- **Offensive holding:** No offensive player, in attempting to block, may use his hands to grab or obstruct a defender, except to initially contact the defender. The hands cannot be used to hang onto or encircle the opponent or to restrict his movement. *10 yards*

- **Offside and encroachment:** A player is offside when any part of him is beyond the line of scrimmage when the ball is put into play. *5 yards*

- **Pass interference:** Once a ball is thrown, no player may hinder the progress of an opponent who has a chance to catch the pass. Incidental contact that does not impede a player or affect his chance to catch the ball is legal. Restrictions on pass interference end once the pass is touched. *15 yards for offensive pass interference*

The following personal fouls result in penalties.

- **Blocking below the waist:** Players on the receiving team on a kickoff or punt cannot block below the waist. After a change of possession, neither team may block below the waist. *15 yards*

- **Chop block:** No offensive player may block a defensive player at the thigh level or below while the defender is being blocked by another offensive player. *15 yards*

- **Clip:** Except for close-in line blocking, no player may clip an opponent below the waist from behind. *15 yards*

- **Crackback block:** An offensive lineman aligned 7 yards or more from a middle lineman

may not clip or contact a defender below the waist while he is within 10 yards either way of the line of scrimmage. *15 yards*

- **Grabbing the face mask:** No player may grasp the face mask of an opponent. *5 yards for incidental grasping and 15 yards for twisting, turning, or pulling the mask*

- **Head slap:** A defensive player may not contact an opponent's head with his palms except to ward him off the line. This exception may not be a repeated act during a single play. *15 yards*

- **Piling on:** Players may not pile on a runner after the ball is dead or intentionally fall upon any prostrate player. *15 yards*

- **Roughing the passer:** After the passer has released the ball, the rusher may make direct contact only up through the rusher's first step. After the first step, the rusher must attempt to avoid contact and not "drive through" the rush. Even if the timing of the contact is legal, a rusher may not be unnecessarily rough, club the passer's arm, or hit the knee or below if the rusher has a direct route to the passer. This is a good safety rule but it is not followed in high school play. *15 yards*

- **Roughing or running into the kicker:** No defensive player may run into or rough a kicker unless the defender has touched the ball or the kicker initiates the contact. There is no penalty if a defender is blocked into the kicker. *5 yards for running into the kicker and 15 yards for roughing the kicker*

- **Striking, kicking, or clubbing:** No player may strike with his fists, club, kick, or knee another player in the head, neck, or face. *15 yards*

- **Tripping:** No player may intentionally trip an opponent. *10 yards*

- **Too many players on the field:** A team may not have more than 11 players on the field at the snap of the ball. (There is no penalty for having fewer than 11.) *15 yards*

- **Unnecessary roughness:** This call covers a variety of illegal actions, including spearing with the helmet, tackling out of bounds, throwing the runner to the ground after the ball is dead, running or diving

into a player who is obviously out of the play, and kicking an opponent above the knee. *15 yards*

• **Unsportsmanlike conduct:** This call is used for any unsporting act, including baiting, taunting, or using abusive or threatening language; unnecessary physical contact with an official; and jumping or standing on another player in an attempt to block a kick. *15 yards*

## EQUIPMENT

The ball is oval shaped, leather bound, and inflated to a pressure 12.5 to 13.5 pounds per square inch; it weighs 14 to 15 ounces. It is 11 to 11.5 inches long and 28 to 28.5 inches at its largest circumference. (Youth league footballs are smaller.)

Players wear helmets, face masks, pads, and other protective equipment. This gear includes shoulder, chest, rib, hip, thigh, knee, shin, elbow, wrist, and forearm pads. Jerseys must cover all pads on the torso and upper

body. Pants must cover the knee, and stockings must cover the lower legs from the feet to the bottom of the pants. Metal and aluminum cleats are prohibited. Conical cleats with tips measuring less than .375-inch in diameter are also prohibited. Nylon cleats with flat steel tips are permitted.

A crew of three operates yardage chains on the sidelines. The chains are 10 yards long and are attached to two sticks 5 feet in height. The down marker has four flip-over numbers (1, 2, 3, and 4) on a stick 4 feet in height. These numbers denote the down that is coming up (see page 104), and the marker is placed at the nose of the ball.

A play clock is used between plays. Various levels have rules denoting how much time can run off a play clock (which begins at the end of one play and ends with the snap of the ball beginning the next play) before a team is penalized for delay of game. In the NFL, it's 40 seconds between plays; in the NCAA, 25 seconds are allowed from the time the ball is ready to be put into play to the snap.

## Game Clock

From high school on up, teams get three timeouts per half. For games tied at the end of regulation time, overtime is played. In the NFL, overtime is begun with a coin toss and a kickoff, and the first team to score wins. In college and high school, each team has a chance to score in the overtime. The clock starts when

- the ball is snapped after a timeout;
- the ball is placed ready to play after a penalty; or
- an official spots the ball at the inbounds mark following an out-of-bounds play, and the referee gives the ready signal (except in the last two minutes of the first half and last five minutes of the game, when the clock doesn't start again until the next snap). *Note:* In NCAA play, the clock doesn't start on any kickoff until a player on the receiving team touches the ball.

The clock stops when the ball is out of bounds; when a pass drops incomplete; when a play is completed during which a foul occurs; when two minutes remain in a half (NFL only); when a first down occurs (college only); when a period expires; when a field goal, safety, or touchdown is scored; when an official signals timeout; or when a down involving a change of possession is completed.

If time expires as a play is in progress, time is not called until the play is completed. If either team commits a foul on the last play of a period, the offense may run another play. If the offense commits a foul on the last play of a half, the half is over.

## OFFICIALS

Any official may rule on any foul; there is no territorial division in this regard. While each official has many duties, the main duties for each include the following.

- The **referee** has general control; he has the final say in any disagreement, including score and number of downs. He starts and stops play, spots the ball after each play, signals coaches for the two-minute warning (in NFL play) and when they have used their timeouts, and announces penalties.

- The **umpire** watches for scrimmage line violations. He records timeouts, watches for line violations on short passes, and assists the referee in ball possession decisions close to the line. He is also in charge of legality of equipment.

- The **linesman** watches primarily for off-side, encroachment, illegal motion, and other violations occurring on the line before or at the snap. He is in charge of the chain crew.

- The **line judge** operates on the opposite side of the field from the linesman. He is responsible for timing the game and for spotting violations, including illegal motion and illegal shift, on his side of the field. He assists on calls of holding, encroaching, offside, forward laterals, and false starts, and he marks the out-of-bounds spot of all plays on his side.

- The **back judge** operates on the middle of the field as the line judge, 20 yards deep. He counts the number of defensive players and watches the eligible receivers on his side of the field, concentrating on action in the area between the field judge and the umpire. He signals when time is out and when the ball is dead, and he assists in calls regarding legal catches. He also judges whether field goals are good.

- The **side judge** operates on the same side as the head linesman, 20 yards deep. He counts the number of defenders and watches the eligible receivers on his side. He watches the action between the umpire and the field judge and assists on calls regarding legal catches, fumble recoveries, and out-of-bounds plays.

- The **field judge** is primarily responsible for covering kicks and forward passes that cross the goal line. He times the halftime and timeouts and the time between plays. He also assists on calls regarding legal catches, fumble recoveries, and out-of-bounds plays. He is positioned on the line judge's side of the field.

For common officials' signals, see figure 18.2.

## MODIFICATIONS

Football can be played in various forms, including flag, touch, Canadian, and arena football, which is played indoors on smaller fields. Youth leagues also have rule variations to enhance players' safety and make the sport more appropriate for kids. Following are some of the basic differences in the rules for flag and touch football, Canadian football, youth football, six-man football, and eight-man football.

### Flag and Touch Football

Flag and touch football have several variations. For general guidelines see table 18.1.

*Contact blocking* allows contact between the opponent's waist and shoulders. Blockers must be on their feet before, during, and after the block; no cross-body blocks or rolling blocks are allowed. An open-hand, straight-arm block is permitted; the blocker may not lock his hands together.

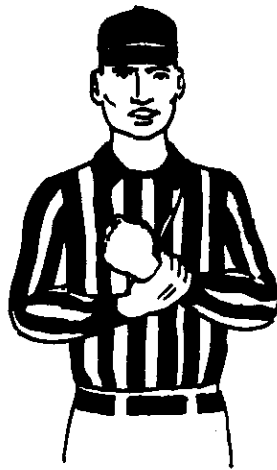
*Screen blocking* allows no contact with the opponent's body. Blockers must be on their feet before, during, and after the block.

A game lasts 48 minutes (two 24-minute halves). The clock runs continuously for the first 22 minutes of a half; it stops as with regular football rules during the last two minutes of a half. Teams get three timeouts per half, lasting one minute each. A team may take no more than two timeouts in the last two minutes of a half. In regular season overtime games, team A starts with a first-and-goal on the opponents' 20-yard line. Team B then gets a chance to score in the same situation. The game is continued in this fashion until the tie is broken. Team B always gets a chance to tie or win. In

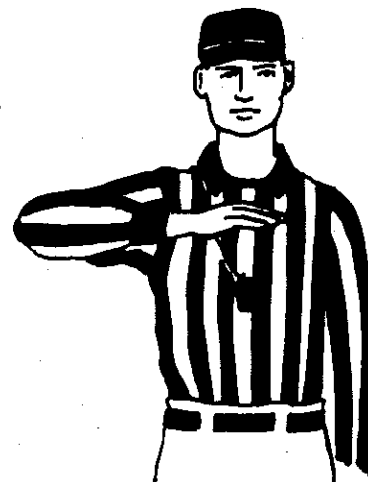




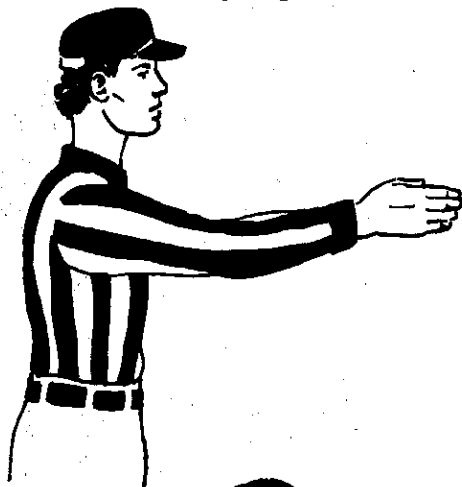
Delay of game



Holding



Illegal motion



First down



Pass interference



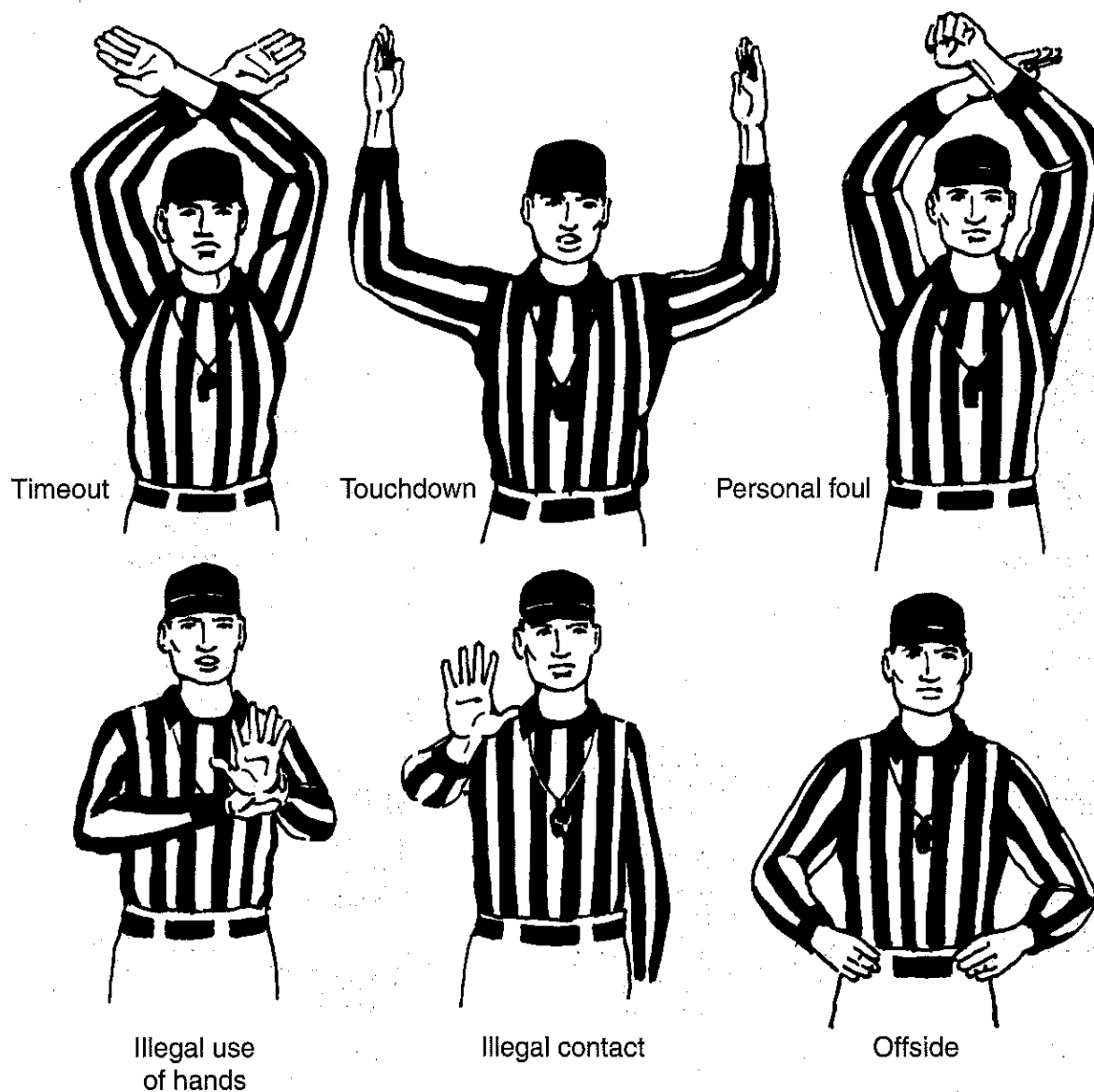
Roughing kicker



Missed kick, penalty refused,  
or incomplete pass

(continued)

► Figure 18.2 Common football officials' signals.



► Figure 18.2 (continued)

Table 18.1 Flag and Touch Football			
Game	Players per team	Blocking	Field
Flag	8	Contact	53 1/3 yd × 100 yd
Touch	7	Contact	53 1/3 yd × 100 yd
Screen flag	7	Screen	53 1/3 yd × 100 yd
Ineligible linemen flag	9	Contact	53 1/3 yd × 100 yd
4 on 4	4	Screen	25 yd × 40 yd

championship games, overtime is decided by sudden death—the first team to score wins.

In flag football, when a flag is removed from the ball carrier, the play is over. In touch football, the play is dead when the ball carrier is legally touched. A new set of downs is awarded each time a team advances to the next zone (a regulation field is divided into five zones of 20 yards each).

In 4 on 4, there are no-run zones from each 5-yard line to the goal line, and from 15-yard line to 15-yard line (i.e., 10 yards across mid-field).

Points are awarded as follows:

- Touchdown = six points
- Touchdown made by a woman (in coed play) = nine points
- Extra point (from the 3-yard line) = one point
- Extra point (from the 10-yard line) = two points
- Return of extra point by defense = two points

A team may choose to attempt the extra point from either the 3-yard line or the 10-yard line.

## Canadian Football

Canadian football is similar to American football. The following list includes some of the significant differences:

- The playing field is 65 yards by 165 yards; goal lines are 110 yards apart.
- The goal posts are on the goal line.
- The end zone is 25 yards deep.
- Teams play with 12 players each.
- Teams have three downs to gain 10 yards.
- Fair catches on punts are not permitted.
- A punt that is not returned from the end zone results in one point awarded to the kicking team.
- Each team gets one timeout per half, to be used only during the last three minutes of a half.

- There is no sudden death; overtime games have two five-minute periods.
- The ball is placed on the 5-yard line for extra point conversions; one point is awarded for kicking an extra point; two are awarded for running or passing the ball over the goal line.

## Youth Football

Many leagues have both age and weight classifications. Some have a mandatory play rule, with players required to play a minimum of plays per game, depending on the number of players on the team. Leagues for younger players (11 and under) often choose to use an 80-yard field. The smaller field is also used for six-man and eight-man leagues. Periods last 10 to 12 minutes, with two-minute breaks between the first and second periods and between the third and fourth periods, as well as a 15-minute halftime.

## Six-Man Football

A few of the differences in the six-man game follow:

- The offense must advance the ball 15 yards in four downs.
- At least three offensive players must be on the line of scrimmage at the snap.
- The ball may not be run directly across the line of scrimmage; it may, however, be advanced by passing, kicking, or lateraling behind the line of scrimmage (the player receiving a lateral may then run across the line).
- Kickoffs are made from the 30-yard line.
- On a touchback, the ball is brought out to the 15-yard line (on an 80-yard field).

## Eight-Man Football

A few of the differences in the eight-man game follow:

- At least five offensive players must be on the line of scrimmage at the snap.
- Backs and the right and left ends are eligible to receive passes.