

## **The Official's Perspective**

*(The following document is an adaptation from a piece created by Lloyd Woodall, former coach, System Director, and GEJFA Official. This document was edited by Bobby Beaulac for GEJFA use in November 2015.)*

This document is written to help guide you as the coach- and especially new coaches- to do the best you can in both some technical training of your players and also in setting a good example that your players will emulate years after they have left youth football.

As a coach, I thought I knew the rules pretty well- but I really didn't. After I became an official and spent many hours reviewing the rules, I realized that I could have been a better coach if I spent a little more time reading the rule book, rather than letting it gather dust in my football bag. I also realized that as a coach, I didn't know how to communicate effectively with the officials. For example, if I thought an official made an error on a call, I didn't realize the difference between a judgment call and a misapplication of a rule (coaches are allowed to request a conference with the referee about a misapplication of a rule, but cannot do so regarding a judgment call). I also did not know the best way to approach an official in this situation. Hopefully, this document will help you gain some insight and become a better coach and role-model for your players.

## **Sportsmanship**

Take note that sportsmanship is the first topic covered here; in the long run, it is hands-down the most important. You as a coach are a huge role-model for your players. If you allow yourself, your assistants, or your parents to shout heated words at the officials and/or angrily confront them, this will give license to your players to do the same, as they will emulate the attitude they see from the adults associated with their team. And although it may not be immediately apparent, these young players will likely carry that attitude forward for the rest of their lives. The full realization of this didn't hit me until years later, when former players of mine who were then teenagers or young adults would see "Coach" and would eagerly want to talk. It was easy to see the impact our relationship had

made on how they viewed the world and lived their lives... all from coaching football.

I would suggest that you view your interaction with the officials as one of cooperation in completing the game safely and fairly, and having FUN. Having an attitude that the officials are adversaries will be counter-productive.

### **The Referee/Coach Conference**

The referee and the officiating crew need to meet with you before the game begins. Generally, this conference will take place about fifteen minutes prior to the scheduled start of the game, but could be later depending on the length of the game before yours, if any. Be prepared and be professional. If you have a question about equipment or if a play is legal, this is your opportunity to get an explanation, rather than a penalty during the game.

### **The Chain Crew**

The visiting team is required to provide 3 volunteers for the chain crew. Have these people identified in advance so they are ready to meet with the Head Linesman to review instructions before the game, and get people who either know how to do the job, or are willing to learn. The chain crew should consider themselves to be part of the officiating crew for the game- these people cannot be checking cell phones or shouting encouragement during the game, and cannot be coaching. The biggest piece of instruction that the Head Linesman will provide during pregame to the chain crew is to **never move the chains or the down box without being signaled to do so by the Head Linesman (NOT another official on the crew!)** If the chains or down box move too early and there is a penalty on the field, it becomes exceedingly difficult to enforce the penalty correctly and this can adversely affect the game.

### **Timeliness**

With as many as six games scheduled at a field on a given Saturday, time is of the essence in completing a game. In extreme situations, officials may have to alter the usual clock management to complete a game as GEJFA has use of a field for a specific length of time, rather than “until the games are over.” If the day’s games are already behind schedule, the officiating crew may do some or all of the following:

- Complete the referee/coach conference for the next game during halftime of the current game
- Request that halftime be shortened from the usual ten minutes (if both coaches agree)
- Request that the next game's teams be ready to begin the game immediately following the completion of the current game

Conversely, there may be times between games where the officiating crew needs to take a few minutes to rest, grab a quick bite to eat, or use the restroom before beginning the next game. We as officials make every effort to get games started on time, but in situations of extreme heat, cold, or rain, we may need to take a few minutes between games to ensure the officials can give the best effort possible on the field.

Coaches can help the games to be completed in the time allowed by having their players as prepared as possible. Officials try not to call delay-of-game penalties, especially at the Rookie and Cub levels, but reasonable limits must be maintained to keep the game moving.

### **Kicking Plays (Kickoffs, Punts, Field Goals, and PAT's)**

Count your players- these plays tend to see more penalties for too many men on the field due to the larger number of substitutes entering/exiting the field. Kicking plays also tend to see more penalties for blocks in the back and it is easy for an official to see this foul in the "open field." Coach your players to refrain from blocking or making contact with an opposing player if they are completely away from the action. This is unnecessary roughness and will be flagged without warning if seen, as this is a safety issue. On a PAT or kickoff, the ball can be positioned anywhere between the hash-marks that the kicking team desires. The guards may lock legs with the snapper pre-snap- but these are the only linemen who may do so. If you are kicking a field goal or PAT, your team is responsible to retrieve the ball- so please have someone in position to retrieve the ball and give it to the Head Linesman so that they can get the ball ready for the kickoff. **Teams are given only sixty seconds between the conclusion of the PAT or field goal and the ready-for-play whistle for the kickoff.** Have your team ready to go at the conclusion of this sixty-second period.

## Offense

You may use your football when you are on offense. It's good practice to have a specific "game ball" that is kept in good condition and is not slippery. Review the size limits in the GEJFA Rules. If a ball feels under-inflated, the officials will ask your team to re-inflate the ball prior to use.

You must have at least seven players on the line of scrimmage each play, and there are always questions as to whether a player is off or on the line of scrimmage. This is a judgment call by the Line Judge and the Head Linesman only. If the Line Judge or Head Linesman holds their arm horizontally pointing towards the offensive backfield, this indicates that the end player on offense on their side of the field is off the line of scrimmage. Teach your players to look for this so they can determine if they are positioned correctly. If a player wants to verbally check in with the wing official, this is acceptable- **but they should ask "am I on?" or "am I off?" rather than "am I good?"** We as officials do not know where your players are supposed to be, so we can only respond by telling them their status (on or off the line).

Teach your players to hand the ball to an official at the conclusion of the play. This enables the officials to get the ball spotted for the next down more quickly and get more plays in for the teams.

The officials will give some latitude in not calling false starts or encroachment (particularly at the Rookie and Cub levels and if no advantage was gained). Similar latitude is given to fouls that are not safety-related and have no effect on the play. For example, if the left tackle is holding, but the play is a sweep to the right side of the line, the officials are not likely to flag the left tackle for holding, but will instead let the player know what they did incorrectly and tell them that if the play had been to their side, the official would have flagged the player for holding. **As the coach, it is imperative that you understand this.** The officials will give equal latitude to both teams, but safety and sportsmanship fouls will not receive this latitude and will be enforced without prior warning. This is a special-emphasis topic for officials and we try to maintain consistency with all of our officials so that the application of the rules will be the same from week to week.

## Defense

Defensive players cannot “simulate the snap count” by shouting something that might be confused with the quarterback’s cadence. Also, contrary to professional rules, if a defensive player encroaches into the neutral zone, it is a foul and there is no opportunity for them to retreat prior to the snap. If a defensive lineman simply lines up very slightly in the neutral zone, some latitude can be given. However, if a defensive player is trying to time a blitz and crosses into the neutral zone, this is a foul for encroachment at the moment he enters the zone.

A foul we often see that is misunderstood is roughing the passer. Once the passer throws the ball, a charging defensive player then must make an attempt to stop his charge into the passer. This does not mean that there cannot be contact; especially in instances where the passer releases the ball an instant before being hit or tackled. The rule is in the book to prevent injury to a player in a vulnerable position.

When the offense is in scrimmage-kick formation (punting, field goal or PAT), the center is granted special protection. The defense must give the center an opportunity to defend himself. Teach your defensive players to either make their charge through the A-gap on either side of the center, or delay a moment so the center has the opportunity to lift his head and be in a position to defend himself. Do not have your defensive players line up head-on the center.

Teach your defensive players the rules regarding blocks in the back, because if the defense intercepts a pass, this is a common foul during the return, and is easily seen in the open field. Also, teach your players away from the action on an interception that they do not need to unnecessarily block an opponent, as often happens, because this can result in a foul for unnecessary roughness.

## **The Officiating Crew**

**Line Judge:** The Line Judge positions himself on the line of scrimmage on the home team’s side of the field. He will observe action near the line of scrimmage and will go downfield to cover passing plays and punts. He is looking at the chains and down box and will be the primary official to stop the clock on first downs. If a play goes to the Head Linesman’s side of the field, he will run “cleanup” and observe action behind the play.

**Head Linesman:** The Head Linesman positions himself on the line of scrimmage on the visiting team's side of the field. His responsibilities are similar to the Line Judge, with the exception that he is responsible for moving the chains and/or down box at the end of each play.

**Referee:** The Referee is the crew lead. He will position himself behind the offensive backfield and will observe action on the line of scrimmage, as well as action on or near the quarterback. The Referee is ultimately the final authority on rules and will announce penalties and enforce as required. If you have a question or disagree with an interpretation of the rules, he will be the official with whom you will ultimately need to communicate your concerns.

**Umpire:** If there is a fourth official, it is the Umpire that will be the additional official. He positions himself towards the center of the field five to seven yards off of the line of scrimmage in the defensive backfield. He will assist the Referee in watching action on the line of scrimmage and also watches for fouls such as ineligible players downfield on passing plays. In addition, he relieves the Referee of the responsibility to spot the ball at the conclusion of each play as well as walking off penalty yardage.

## **Penalties**

Officials do their best to fairly administer the games, but are human beings and do make mistakes, and this is part of the game of football. If a penalty is called against your team or one wasn't called on the opposing team and you feel it was in error, shouting at the officials will be counter-productive; officials will not change the call because someone is shouting at them. One point to keep in mind is that frequently when coaches disagree with a call, their vantage point is from much further away than the official who threw the flag; their view may be from thirty or more yards away, while the official calling the foul is within a few yards of the play and intensely observing the action in question. Each official has a specific part of the field or players to observe, rather than following the player with the ball as most casual observers do. An official may not know what is happening in other areas of the field, but will be focusing on his own area of responsibility, and thus has the best opportunity of anyone to see what actually happened in that area. When a coach shouts at the officials, it simply shows disrespect for the officiating crew and tends to build animosity. Such actions by a

coach will likely result in enforcement of an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty against the coach. The rules specifically state that is an unsportsmanlike foul for a coach to attempt to influence the decision of a game official (Rule 9-8-1-b). Consider again that the behavior of the coaches tends to teach the players on your team how to view and/or interact with the officiating crew or authority in general.

Typically, a game with many penalties is not the result of energetic action by the players, but rather poor understanding of the rules. All too often, what accompanies games with many penalties is shouting at the officials and emotional outbursts from the sidelines. This behavior will not change the enforcement of the play in question, but will at some point lead to unnecessary penalties for unsportsmanlike conduct or, worse, lead to the ejection of a coach or player. You may consider setting up a “support system” in advance to help calm anyone who appears to be losing the right perspective. The actions of out-of-control coaches, players, and fans have caused good officials to quit, and ultimately this lowers the experience level and quality of all of our officials.

### **The “Judgment Call” vs. the “Misapplication of a Rule”**

“Judgment Calls” (such as whether or not pass interference was committed, a player stepped out of bounds, whether an action was holding or not, etc.) will not be changed by questioning the officiating crew. However, a “misapplication of a rule” can be questioned. If you believe this type of error has occurred, ask for an explanation of the call, and after the explanation, give the official a specific rule that you believe has been misapplied. Officials may reverse calls of this nature, but it must be done before the next play begins. It’s best to request to speak to the Referee in this situation as he is the official who will ultimately rule on any reversal.

If a flag is thrown, the official who threw the flag (if it is not the Referee) will consult with the Referee prior to enforcing the penalty. Sometimes flags will be “waved-off” after this discussion; in general, we teach officials that in doubt, throw the flag, as it can be waved off if after consultation it is determined there wasn’t a foul. However, if we as officials don’t throw the flag, we can’t decide to go back and drop it later except in rare instances (such as too many men on the field).

## Game Reports

For a game report regarding the officials to be effective, it needs to list the official's name or position for identification purposes. The Referee should give you a card during the pre-game meeting with the names and positions of each official on it; save this card in a safe place for use in filling out the game report. If you do not receive this card, **indicate this in your Game Report so that the Officials' Coordinator can follow up with the Crew Lead and get this corrected.**

In your Game Report, it is important to be as factual and specific as possible, and be sure to let your emotions cool down before hitting the "send" key. Game Reports are used as a tool to coach our officials, but requires specific feedback to be effective.