

Gentlemen –

There has been a lot of discussion about the 2014 NFHS High School Football Rulebook Points of Emphasis; in particular the facts surrounding helmet hits and their enforcement. This is an attempt to get everyone on the same page. (or at the very least, in the same book).

Coaches – I'm sure that you are all very aware of the importance of player safety. This memo is not intended as an attempt to educate you on things that you already know. This is simply a discussion of the philosophy that will hopefully be used by our officials, and accepted by the coaches. The local chapter of officials recently had a long discussion about all that is to follow.

There are some rule changes with respect to "the use of the helmet" in high school football, but for the most part, they are just a matter of clarification and emphasis. Terms have been added like "targeting", "launching", "defenseless player" and "intent". The NFHS has gone to great lengths to describe very specific situations that should be considered fouls:

*"Some examples of fouls that merit our extra attention are launching, fouls against players obviously out of the play, helmet-to-helmet contact and fouls against defenseless players. No player shall target and initiate contact against an opponent with the crown (top) of his helmet, and no player shall target and initiate contact to the area above the shoulders of a defenseless opponent with the helmet, forearm, elbow or shoulder. The launch occurs when a player takes a running start, leaves his feet and uses the helmet to strike the opponent or by crouching and using an upward and forward thrust of the body to make contact above the shoulders of an opponent. It is an extremely dangerous maneuver to both players involved and deserves strict penalty and possible disqualification enforcement if flagrant. The game official must draw distinction between contact necessary to make a legal block or tackle, and that which targets a defenseless player."*

There is a very large concern at the national level that the sport of football as we know it may not exist a few years down the road. We see reports on tv on a regular basis with respect to the growing "problem" of concussions – not just at the high school level, but also with respect to the NFL, college, and youth game. The obvious way, in fact, the only way to blunt these concerns is by having everyone involved do a better job with their responsibilities in this area in order to reduce the number of injuries experienced by the participants.

The 2014 official's manual states what might seem obvious:

"A primary goal of the NFHS Football Rules Committee continues to be keeping the game of scholastic football as safe as possible. In doing such, a more diligent approach to player safety must be adhered to by all game officials, players, coaches and administrators in order to achieve this goal."

"Unsafe acts and techniques cannot be tolerated by those administering and participating in the game of football. Coaches and game officials must act proactively and decisively to eliminate, to the greatest extent possible, threats to the welfare of the student-athletes playing football."

"Unwarranted and unnecessary "punishing" of an opponent has become a style of play which is specifically condemned. Illegal helmet contact is an act of initiating contact with the helmet against an opponent and remains a major safety concern in our sport."

As coaches, your responsibility is to teach your players proper technique, especially in the area of helmet contact, and to modify behavior that isn't consistent with the emphasis on safety.

As officials, our responsibility is to make sure that any illegal acts are penalized fairly and consistently.

This year's manual states:

*"The No.1 responsibility for game officials must be player safety. Any initiation of contact with the helmet is illegal; therefore, it must be penalized consistently and without warning."*

During our official's discussion, we talked about exactly how to approach this responsibility. The decision was an easy one. We are going to try and do exactly what has been asked of us. We will do our best to penalize all illegal hits on the spot, without warning. If a particular hit is questionable as to its legality, we have agreed to err on the side of player safety and penalize the hit. Here are some of the things that we will be paying special attention to:

*"In 2014, the NFHS Football Rules Committee passed rules concerning targeting and contacting defenseless players. Game officials must be alert for such fouls on plays in their primary or secondary areas of coverage. Examples include, but are not limited to:*

*(a) a quarterback moving down the line of scrimmage who has handed or pitched the ball to a teammate, and then makes no attempt to participate further in the play;*

*(b) a kicker who is in the act of kicking the ball, or who has not had a reasonable amount of time to regain his balance after the kick;*

*(c) a passer who is in the act of throwing the ball, or who has not had a reasonable length of time to participate in the play again after releasing the ball;*

*(d) a pass receiver whose concentration is on the ball and the contact by the defender is unrelated to attempting to catch the ball;*

*(e) a pass receiver who has clearly relaxed when he has missed the pass or feels he can no longer catch the pass;*

*(f) a kick returner attempting to catch a kick;*

*(g) a kick receiver who is immediately contacted after touching the ball;*

*(h) a player on the ground;*

*(i) any player who has relaxed once the ball has become dead;*

*(j) a player who receives a blind-side block;*

*(k) a ball carrier already in the grasp of an opponent and whose forward progress has been stopped; and*

*(l) any player who is obviously out of the play."*

As officials, we must be alert for all of these situations possibly occurring and penalize them if they do.

During our official's discussion, we talked about many of the same concerns that you as coaches are probably talking about. What about the running back who drops his head when he is about to be contacted – will he be called for illegal helmet contact?

The only answer to this question is, “you have to see the play”. That may sound like a cop-out, but it's absolutely true. Many running backs have a natural tendency to duck their heads or turn their body just before contact – a natural reaction to brace them for the hit. By dropping or turning at the last second, helmet contact may be initiated, not just by the running back, but also by the tackler, who just a second before was in perfect tackling position – eyes up, head off to the side. The action of the runner may cause the defender's helmet to impact on the runner's helmet. So is this a foul, and if so, who is it on?

As just described, I don't think we can have a foul. The key part to that determination has to be intent. Did either of these players “intentionally” make contact with their helmet? There will always be helmet to helmet contact in football. Sometimes it just can't be helped. If we penalize someone every time two helmets come together, it will turn into a very long game. But we must always err on the side of safety.

So let's talk about the real aspect of “intent”. As officials, we have seen many players over the years that “lead” with their helmets – running backs that look to punish a tackler by “sticking their head in there”, as well as defensive players who look to punish ball carriers by “sticking their head in there” on the tackle. I've heard many coaches talking with admiration about one of their players who is not afraid to “stick his head in there”. This is what we need to get rid of – the player who leads with his helmet is as much a danger to himself as to his opponent.

As officials, when we see this type of intentional use of the head, we must penalize it. There may be players on your teams right now that fit the description. Let's work together to modify their behavior.

In summary, we, as officials, are determined to help “get the head out of football”. We would appreciate any and all help we can get from the coaches and players. When an illegal contact call is made against your team, the natural tendency for coaches is to argue the call, just like you would with holding, block-in-the-back, or anything else. We understand this is part of coaching. We also understand that we miss calls. We fully expect to hear, “Sure, ya call it on my guy, but what about their guy two plays ago?!” What we would love to see is a coach talking with, or admonishing his player for the illegal hit, not blaming it on poor judgment by the official.

2 things that I'll predict right now:

1. If we all do our jobs with respect to illegal hits, we will be able to eliminate 70-80% of these fouls from the game, which may, in turn, prevent a lot of injuries to a lot of kids. Nobody wants 15-yard penalties on their team – modify the behavior to keep your drive going or make a defensive stop.
2. This will not turn out to be as big a point of contention as some think.

Thanx to all for your time – best of luck this season.