

Football Rules for Dummies

If it looks like a foul, it probably is.

A great resource for learning the exact rules of the game is the FIFA rule book, which is called the Laws of the Game -- which you can find online at www.fifa.com. But there's really no need to wade through all the rules. Here's what you need to know:

1. Don't Touch

This is as simple as it sounds and everybody you've ever talked to about soccer, regardless of their level of soccer knowledge, knows it. You've probably said this sentence once or twice yourself -- "All I know about soccer is you can't use your hands." The right way to think about it, however, is the player cannot "handle" the ball, and that means touch the ball with any part of the hand or arm. If the ball hits the player on the arm or hand (as opposed to the player handling the ball), it should not be called a handball. But, if the player's arm is extended or moving and comes into contact with the ball, a handball may be called.

Unless, that is, you are the goalkeeper. Goalies can touch the ball as long as they are within the penalty area, which is the big box that surrounds the goal. It extends 18 yards out from the goal line. Once the goalie leaves the penalty area, he must play the ball like any other player, which means he cannot touch the ball with his hands or arms. The smaller box in front of the goal is the goalie's box and is six yards long. It serves no good purpose (it is not like a crease in hockey) other than a place to put the ball for goal kicks (more on that later). So, don't concern yourself with it.

One rule regarding goalkeepers you should know is the back-pass rule. Goalkeepers are not allowed to pick up a pass that came from one of their team mates. The rule was established to keep teams from protecting a lead and wasting time by constantly passing it back to their goalkeeper. If a player passes it to his goalkeeper, the goalie has to play the ball with his feet, or the other team will get an indirect kick (indirect kicks are discussed later) from the spot where the goalie picked up the pass.

2. Fouls

Again, if it looks like it should be a foul, it probably is. You can't knock someone down, trip him, kick him, push him, punch him, or anything else that is unacceptable to civilized humans.

Basically, you can't gain an advantage at the expense of an opponent. However, bumping an opponent while competing for a loose ball is okay, as long as it is done without the use of arms, hands, knees, thighs or feet. Once the arms or hands come up, the whistle usually blows.

There is a common shout heard from players who have just been called for a foul -- "But I got the ball!" Getting the ball does not make everything okay and legal. The referee's response should be "Find a different way to get it." The manner in which players get the ball has to be clean, avoiding excessive contact. The player's path to the ball can't be through or over anyone.

There are some non-contact fouls of which to be aware. One is offside, which we will discuss later. Others are obstruction, dangerous plays, and of course, hand balls.

Obstruction is exactly what it sounds like -- purposely preventing an opponent from getting to the ball. To be guilty of obstruction, however, intent is factored in, meaning a player without the ball is purposely getting in the way of an opponent who is trying to get to the ball.

Dangerous plays can be classified as trying to kick a ball that is in the air near another player's head; trying to head a ball that is too close to the ground and another player's feet; or trying to play the ball when you have fallen on the ground in a way that you might hurt yourself or an opposing player.

3. Throw-Ins

When one team kicks the ball over a sideline and out of bounds, the other team gets a throw-in (some youth leagues might use kick-ins). A throw-in has to be taken with two hands over the head and both feet staying on the ground.

4. Corner kicks, Goal kicks

If the ball goes over one of the end lines, it is either a goal kick or a corner kick depending on which team kicked it out of bounds. If the defensive team kicks it out, it's a corner kick. If the offensive team kicks it out, it's a goal kick.

A corner kick is taken from, well, the corner. There is a small arc painted in front of each corner flag. The ball has to be placed in that arc and kicked from within there. A goal kick is placed within that otherwise useless goalie's box and kicked from there. A goal kick has to leave the penalty area (the 18-yard box) before any other player can play it – the cause of a great many do-overs in youth games.

5. Offside

First of all, if you want to impress other parents, officially it is offside, not offsides.

Now what you need to know is that the offside rule is really not that confusing. The mystery comes in the explanation, which isn't always easy to do.

The basics of the rule are that an offensive player cannot be ahead of the ball and involved in the attack unless there is a defender between him and the goalkeeper, which his team is attacking. In other words, you can't cherry-pick by hanging out behind all the other team's defenders and waiting for your team-mates to boot it up to you.

The rule says there must be two defenders between the attacking player and the goal unless the ball is already ahead of the attacking player. The two players, however, includes the goalkeeper. Generally, it is one defender and the goalkeeper, but in certain situations – like when the goalie is caught out – there may be an attacker in an offside position even though a defender is between him and the goal. This rarely happens because if the goalie is caught up-field, the ball is usually behind him.

A few catches, though. First, you can't be called offside if you are standing on your half of the field when the ball is kicked. And the key to any offside situation is the phrase "When the ball is kicked." If there is a defender between an offensive player and the defender's goal when the ball is kicked, it doesn't matter where that player is when he or she receives the pass. The offside rule also requires that the player be involved in the attack. Therefore, a player near one sideline who has nothing to do with the play, or a player who is lying on the field hurt and not involved in the attack may not be called offside. Also there is no offside on throw-ins.

6. Direct and Indirect Free Kicks and Penalty Kicks

After any foul the team that was fouled will be awarded a free kick from the spot where the foul was committed. The free kick will either be a direct free kick or an indirect free kick. You can score off a direct kick by kicking the ball directly into the goal; you cannot score off an indirect kick. An indirect kick must touch another player – on either team – before it can go into the net, or it does not count as a goal and the defensive team gets a goal kick. That is why a team with an indirect kick near the opposing team's goal may have one player tap the ball so a second player can shoot – once the second player has touched the ball, it will be a goal if it goes directly into the other team's goal even if no one else touches it.

Physical fouls and hand balls are rewarded with direct kicks. Corner kicks are direct kicks. Offside and obstruction are rewarded with indirect kicks.

When a player takes a free kick, including kick-offs, goal kicks, and corner kicks, after he kicks the ball, he cannot touch the ball again until another player touches the ball. Therefore, a player cannot simply start dribbling the ball on a free kick.

Penalty kicks are a special kind of direct kick. Penalty kicks are awarded to a team when the opposing team commits a direct kick foul (for example, a hand ball or a physical foul) in its own penalty area. Instead of placing the ball where the foul occurred, the ball is placed on the penalty spot – precisely twelve yards in front of the centre of the goal. Only one player on the attacking team is permitted in the penalty area to take the penalty kick and the goalie is the only defender permitted in the penalty area when a penalty kick is taken. Players must also be outside the arc at the top of the penalty area, in order to give the kicker room to approach the ball. The goalie must start with his heels on the goal line until the ball is kicked by the attacking player. If the ball hits the goalie and stays in the field, it is a live ball and any player can then play it. If the ball hits the post or crossbar, any player – except the one who kicked it – can play it.

7. Yellow and Red Cards

Yellow and red cards are soccer's punishment system. A yellow card is shown to a player as a warning. Yellow cards can be given for a dirty foul, mouthing off to the ref, wasting time, intentional handballs and bad language and unsportsmanlike conduct, among other things at the discretion of the referee. Most fouls or tussles away from the play are yellow cards. If a player receives two yellow cards in the same game, he is ejected and his team has to play a man down.

Two yellow cards in the same game equal a red card. However, a player can receive a red card without having previously receiving a yellow card. A referee can give a red card to a player without warning. Red cards are given for excessively dirty fouls, throwing punches, language, and intent to injure, among other infractions deemed serious by the official.

An infraction that is supposed to be an automatic red card is tackling from behind – when a player slides in to tackle an opponent from behind in a violent manner.

And yes, coaches can be given yellow and red cards.