

THE PARENT GUIDE TO REFEREE DECISIONS

Although soccer's Laws of the Game are simply stated, the applications of these laws by the referee on the field can become a complex situation. It is clearly stated in the LOTG that application is 'in the opinion of the referee'. This guide is to assist the spectator in understanding certain decisions the referee makes and the thought process that precedes the decision.

The following applications will be discussed:

Why some of the LOTG seem different for different games Pre-game inspection Ball in and out of play at the touchline (sideline) Offside position and offside Dangerous play Possession of the ball by the goalkeeper Stopping play for an injury Players touching other players with their hands The difference between fair charging and a foul Identifying fouls and non-fouls The clock – keeping time Who can enter the field of play
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Keep in mind that the referee must weigh several criteria before making a call. Also remember the basic of physics, which is that sound travels slower than light. We all see an action on the field at the same time. Then the referee must assess the situation, and if it warrants stopping the game, they bring their hand to their mouth and blow the whistle. This is often misconstrued as the referee either making the call late or being influenced by coaches and spectators. This is not the case, for referees are supposed to keep the game flowing and so their multi-tiered decisions are important steps to accomplish this.

It is hoped that this document will help parents understand the challenge of the referee as well as how some of the Laws of the Game are applied. Understanding the game will give more enjoyment to the observer as well as ensuring the AYSO philosophy of keeping the game 'fun, fair, and safe'.

Why some of the LOTG seem different for different games

All soccer officials are trained using the FIFA Laws of the Game. AYSO referees also apply AYSO National Rules and Regulations as they apply to AYSO games, which is an instructional and recreational level of youth soccer. There are certain modifications applied to protect the younger players. These modifications are then tempered a bit in the older divisions.

Some of these differences include allowing a player to retake a throw-in, less tolerance for potential 'dangerous play' calls including dangerous slide tackles and high kicks, more protection of the goal keeper, and a prescribed method for substituting players at specified times to ensure that all players play a minimum of two quarters of the game (three quarters in some regions)

Pre-Game Inspection

The pre-game inspection of the field, the equipment, and the players is required at all levels of soccer. The referee team is charged with making sure that all the facets of the game on the field are safe to the individual and to the opponent.

Jewelry is just not allowed! Medical ID bracelets or necklaces are allowed as long as they are properly secured. Taping over newly pierced ears does not allow the player to play. If there is worry about the newly pierced holes closing up, you can replace the post with fish line. Head coverings are only allowed if they are for religious or medical reasons. (if this is the case – it would be helpful for the player to carry a note in his/her bag in case the referee needs written verification). Goalkeepers may wear soft-billed caps.

Players will not be allowed to play if they have a cast or finger splint.

Ball in and out of play at the touchline (sideline)

In order for the ball to go out of play (in touch), the entire ball must cross the plane of the most outer edge of the sideline (touchline). Therefore the assistant referee is in the best position to see the ball crossing the plane.

There are instances when the coach, spectator, and referee see the ball leaving the field last touched by different players. There are two ideas for the spectator to remember. First, no game is decided by a throw-in and secondly, about 80%(in younger divisions) of the throw-ins taken go to the opposing team. Therefore it might be considered an advantage for the other team to be awarded the throw-in.

Offside position and offside

This is one of the simplest laws and yet the most misunderstood. Most spectators (and coaches) keep their vision on the ball and the players around the ball. When the ball is kicked to a teammate towards the goal, the eyes usually follow the flight of the ball until the vision includes a player near where the ball lands. Spectators usually are not aware of what a player, who might be offside, was doing before and after the ball was kicked.

The Assistant Referee is to judge if a player is in the ***Offside Position***. It does not matter where play is at the time. The referee uses three criteria to determine this ‘offside position’ and all three must be present. The first criterion is that the attacker needs to be in his/her attacking side of the field (closest to the goal they are attacking). The second criterion is that the attacker be between the goal and the second-to-last defender. It does not matter what side of the field or how close that second-to-last defender is to the player in question. Therefore the attacker may be closer to the goal than the player guarding them, but still not offside in comparison to an opponent stationed on the other side of the field. The attacker also needs to be ahead of the ball to be in offside position.

If a player is in the offside position when a teammate kicks the ball to them – and then become involved in the play – they are offside. If they are in the offside position and come back onside to play the ball – they are still offside. There are many scenarios in regards to an offside call, but suffice to say that only the Assistant Referee is in position to evaluate an offside decision.

Spectators and coaches often call ‘not offside’ or ‘offside’ from their view at the halfway line. It is truly impossible to determine an offside call from that position on the field unless the player is in the offside position by over ten yards or more.

Closer calls can only be made from the Assistant Referee position.

Dangerous play

Dangerous Play results in an indirect free kick (cannot score directly from the first kick).

Dangerous play is against an opponent. There are many instances where dangerous play might be observed. The most common are:

Kicking at the ball, while lying on the ground, with opponents in the vicinity to play the ball. It is not dangerous play if there are no opponents near the ball.

High kicking or exposing cleats to an opposing player is dangerous play if the opponent is close enough to be in danger. Referees often use criteria to judge how dangerous the high kick really was. They watch the reaction of the opponent, the height of the kick, the angle of the foot, the intensity of the leg movement (as opposed to moving the leg into a high position to trap the ball), and the potential for injury from such an action. (AYSO referees will call almost all the high kicks while referees in other levels of soccer might allow the players to play through the action.)

If a player is attempting to kick a ball waist high and the opponent tries to ‘head’ the ball, it is possible that the opponent will be called for dangerous play because they put themselves in ‘harm’s way’ by lowering their head into the line of the kick.

There is always discussion about protecting the keeper. Keepers are taught that the referee will protect them, which referees will do. Some keepers believe they can dive at the ball as an attacking player is dribbling towards them and that if they are kicked then the referee will call a foul on the attacking player. This is not accurate. The referee will protect the keeper, but the keeper cannot exhibit dangerous play and expect to have a foul called on the opponent.

Possession of the ball by the goalkeeper

The goalkeeper can possess (or control) the ball with as little as one finger. This does not mean that if the keeper puts one finger on the ball that they have possession. They have to exhibit control of the ball to the referee. If they are touching the ball but not actually controlling it, the attacker has the right to attempt to remove the ball from the keeper’s possible control. The referee must then decide the following in order to take the proper action:

1. Did the keeper have control?

As mentioned above, control has to be established. If the keeper has a firm hand on the ball but it then squibs away – it was not controlled.

2. What was the position of the attacker when he/she tried to dislodge the ball?

If the attacker is right upon the keeper then they should attempt to play the ball until the keeper gains control. If the attacker comes running in at full speed from five or ten yards away, then the keeper is potentially in a dangerous situation.

3. How intense was the attacker's attempt to remove the ball from the keeper's reach?

The attacker has the right to play the ball until the keeper displays control. This does not mean the attacker can flail at the ball several times hoping to kick it free. This is definitely dangerous play because the keeper is trying to control the ball with both hands and is essentially unprotected.

Stopping Play for an Injury

Referees are trained not to stop play for every player who falls down. If a player falls down the referee will keep an eye on the player and let play continue. If the ball goes out of play for a normal stoppage of play (throw-in, goal kick, corner kick), the referee will check on the player before allowing play to continue. If the play comes back to the area of the fallen player and the player is still unable to continue, the referee will stop play. Falling down is a part of the sport and spectators (parents) should attempt to keep their emotions in check while the injury is assessed.

Players touching other players with their hands

FIFA Laws allow a player to put their hand on another player. Touching an opponent is not a pushing foul. The referee team will determine when the player crosses the line between touching and pushing.

The difference between fair charging and a foul (Fair Charging vs. Charging)

Everyone knows that pushing is not allowed in soccer. However, "fair charging" is actually a legal form of pushing and occurs when two players are contesting for the ball. To be considered "fair charging," the ball must be within playing distance from the players, say 6 feet or so, and the players shoulder-to-shoulder. Since both players have a right to the ball, pushing or bumping each other out of the way with the shoulder to get to the ball is allowed. What the referee is looking for is that the players are each attempting to play the ball, and not the opponent. If one player is looking at his/her opponent and not the ball, fair charging becomes pushing, which is a foul and is punishable by a direct free kick.

A player cannot lower their shoulder and plow into the opponent; also, a player may not come from several feet away and run into the opponent with their shoulder -- this is called charging, and is not allowed.

Often the fair charging is between two players of significant size difference. Although the bigger player may have the strength advantage, the smaller player still cannot lean a shoulder into their opponent to gain leverage against the player while not attempting to play the ball.

Finally, if the players are not within playing distance from the ball, “fair charging” is not allowed.

Identifying fouls (and non-fouls)

A foul is an unfair or unsafe action committed by a player against an opponent or the opposing team, on the field of play, while the ball is in play. If any of these three requirements is not met, the action is not a foul, however the action can still be called ‘misconduct’.

There are ten fouls for which, if play is stopped, the resulting restart is a direct free kick (or penalty kick). A *direct free kick* is a kick that, when taken, can score a goal directly without another player touching it (an *indirect free kick* cannot result in a goal directly from the taking of that kick without another player touching it).

Six of the ten fouls (kick, trip, jump at, charge, strike, push) require the referee to evaluate how the act was committed. If, in the opinion of the referee, the action was careless, reckless or involved excessive force, the foul can then be whistled and play stopped (with various resulting penalties). Inadvertent or accidental actions should not be punished though the referee’s on-field decision may be that the “accidental” action may have been careless, therefore avoidable, and a foul may be called. The referee is in a unique position (on the field amongst the players) and has a vantage point that no others have to be able to judge a foul. Referees are charged with making almost instantaneous decisions about an action that occurs in the blink of an eye. Sometimes the referee may make no decision at all about an action that may have appeared to be an obvious foul to the casual spectator. The referee is applying his/her discretion in allowing play to continue in light of the fact that the foul to the opposing player had little resulting consequence (didn’t disadvantage or endanger it).

The remaining four fouls, (making contact with an opponent during a tackle prior to making contact with the ball, holding, spitting and deliberate handling) are called by the referee **if** they are observed and not **how** they are observed.

Certain fouls are seen more often than others at the AYSO level. Kicking, tripping and pushing are those fouls. Physical contact between opponents is allowed and very common on the soccer field. In the course of the game, while contesting for and within playing distance of the ball, two players may legally go shoulder to shoulder (called fair charging). There may be instances when one player is knocked to the ground as a result of that contact and there will be no resulting foul. A foul may be called if, in the opinion of the referee, one of the players is careless or reckless or uses an arm, a hip or a dipped shoulder to unfairly force the opponent off the ball.

Handling the ball deliberately by any player other than the goalkeeper is never allowed. This is the one foul that is committed against the opposing team as opposed to being committed against an opponent. The key word here is “**deliberately**”. If the player could have avoided touching the ball, but chose not to, or the player’s arms were not in a natural playing position, then deliberate handling may be called. Handling involves deliberate contact with the ball by a player’s hand or arm (fingertips to shoulders). Moving hands or arms instinctively to protect the body does not usually mean the ball has been handled, unless the player subsequently directs or controls the ball with the hand or arm contacted. A vast majority of the contact between ball and hand or arm in soccer is inadvertent (not deliberate) and, therefore, not subject to sanctioning by the referee even if the player may benefit from that contact. A common rule of thumb followed by referees is that: “if the ball plays the player – no handling. If the player plays the ball – handling.”

(Parents – take the time to go back and re-read the section on ‘deliberate handling’ because this is one of the most misunderstood fouls.)

The clock – keeping time

The referee is responsible for keeping the accurate time of the match. Referees, when possible, will add time to the allotted minutes, if in their opinion a certain amount of time was lost for injuries, retrieving the ball from unusual surroundings, or some sort of wasting time technique used by one team. The added time usually is in one-minute increments but it is whatever the referee determines.

Once the referee blows the whistle – the half or the game is over. Even if the ball is headed towards the goal in the air it is over when the whistle blows. Although it might seem fair to the attacking team to allow the continuation of the ball, it is not fair to the defending team if the ball goes in the goal after the game is over. (This is different than basketball where the player needs to release the ball before the buzzer)

Who can enter the field of play?

Essentially, no one is allowed on the field without the permission of the referee. This includes coaches, even during an injury stoppage. After the referee has stopped play (refer to *Stopping play for an injury*), he/she will assess the severity of the injury and then call the coach or trainer onto the field if necessary. It is understood that coaches and spectators will be very concerned when a player goes down, but having people run onto the field at random creates a very dangerous situation. There are very few severe injuries that occur, and many are a combination of bruised body part and bruised ego. The referee assesses this and if necessary will call others onto the field.

Coaches are not allowed on the field during halftime breaks unless the referee invites them on the field. There are no exceptions to this. Good intentions on the part of the coach do not give them the freedom to come on the field.

Spectators are never allowed on the field. In the case of a severe injury to a player, the referee will probably allow the parent of that child to join the coach and/or trainer on the field to comfort the child. The parent must request approval from the referee.

Final Note:

AYSO referees are trained to keep the game fun, fair, and safe. It is a very difficult task to protect twenty-two players on the field, make all the calls, keep a dialogue going with coaches and players, and allow the game to move and be flowing. Before referees it was a 'gentleman's sport'. Referees were added to soccer as competition increased to make sure that the game remained 'fair'.

It is expected that players, coaches, and spectators always act as 'gentlemen' and 'ladies' during a soccer match. It has been said that knowledge is power. We hope this document has empowered everyone to enjoy the wonderful sport of soccer more so than before.

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