



Cut Blocking - Legal or Not

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Dealing with Blocks Below the Waist

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WHAT IS "CUT BLOCKING"?

The term "cut blocking" is used by coaches and is not a part of NFHS football rules. Understanding what is legal and what is not legal is all-important in addressing this concept. Cut blocking is blocking below the waist and generally means contact at the knees or lower. Some coaches refer to it as almost tripping. It is used by offensive players to slow hard-charging defensive linemen and blitzing linebackers and defensive backs. Cut blocking may be used to prevent pursuit by defensive players. Defensive players may use cut blocking to strip blockers in front of the ball carrier. For a number of reasons, it is controversial at all levels of football. Many coaches and players think it is a very dangerous and injury-causing technique. There are reasons that legal blocking below the waist can occur only under very limited circumstances under NFHS rules. One major reason is to reduce injuries, especially to knees.

WHERE IS BLOCKING BELOW THE WAIST LEGAL?

By NFHS football rules, blocking below the waist is only legal in the Free Blocking Zone. The free-blocking zone is a rectangle eight yards by six yards. It is four yards on either side of the ball and three yards behind each line of scrimmage.

Any below-the-waist block outside the free-blocking zone is an illegal block. If in the official's judgment the initial contact is below the waist, it is an illegal block. It is important to remember that the defense as well as the offense can commit this foul. There are no other criteria for this contact.

WHO CAN LEGALLY BLOCK BELOW THE WAIST?

1. Offense and Defense - may legally block below the waist in the Free Blocking Zone (FBZ).
2. All players involved in the block are on the line of scrimmage and in the zone at the snap.
3. Offense - center, the guards and the tackles should normally meet this rule. The end or ends may or may not be in the Free Blocking Zone. Probably no more than six players and most likely only five players with the formations used today. If any part of a player's body is in the zone at the snap, he is in the Free Blocking Zone.
4. Defense - Any player within four yards laterally from the ball and within one yard of the line of scrimmage is in the Free Blocking Zone.
5. The contact must be in the Free Blocking Zone.

WHEN CAN A PLAYER(S) LEGALLY BLOCK BELOW THE WAIST?

1. The exception begins at the snap.
2. The exception ends when the ball leaves the zone. If the ball should return to the FBZ (quarterback scrambling, etc.), the exception has already ended and blocking below the waist is not legal.
3. When a scrimmage kick formation is used, blocking below the waist is legal only in initial blocks after the snap by offensive and defensive linemen.

CHOP BLOCK

1. This is an illegal block.
2. This is a double-team block - one above the knees and one at or below the knees.
3. Whether or not there is a delay, it is an illegal block.
4. This foul carries a great risk of injury and not just to the player being blocked. A player doing the chop-block suffered a dislocated shoulder in one of our 2008 games.

OFFICIATING THE BELOW-THE-WAIST BLOCK OR "CUT BLOCK"

NFHS football rules permit blocking below the waist only in the Free Blocking Zone. This eight-yard by six-yard rectangle is centered on the ball prior to the snap. Therefore, the referee and umpire will have most of the responsibility for determining if the block(s) is/are legal. The wing officials would help in judging blocking behind the ball or blocking to prevent pursuit.

Each official should follow a mental checklist prior to every snap. This would start when the ball is spotted and continues until the snap. Blocking below the waist/cut-blocking will occur quickly and last only an instant. It is imperative that officials be aware and alert for this contact. It is not like holding, which can go on for some time and officials have more time to judge the action.

Officials have to be aware that if an injury occurs due to an illegal block, calling the foul and throwing the flag will not prevent the injury on that play. However, it should play a part in preventing injuries in the future.

Officials have two keys in determining if a below-the-waist block is legal:

1. The players involved in the contact are in the Free Blocking Zone and on the line of scrimmage at the snap. These players/positions must be identified.
2. When the ball leaves the zone, the blocking exception is ended. Officials must know when the ball left the zone.

REFEREE DUTIES:

1. The referee has a number of duties prior to the snap. Among these are declaring the ball ready for play, counting players, observing the offensive for substitutions and observing shifts. He/she must remember that a back can commit a dead-ball false start.
2. The starting position for scrimmage plays is generally 10 to 12 yards or so behind the line of scrimmage on the passing arm-side of the quarterback. Counting the offense gives the referee an opportunity to make contact with the umpire. It is extremely important to know if the defensive end is in the FBZ. The referee can use the paradigm that if the defensive end is lined up head up or on the inside shoulder of the tight end (who was in the FBZ), then the defender is in the FBZ. The referee will probably have the only view of this if the play is going the other way.

3. After the ball is snapped, key the tackle on the opposite side, making sure his block is legal. The referee must look for delayed blocks involving linebackers not on the line of scrimmage at the snap. During a pass or slowly developing play, be aware of the back(s) blocking below the waist. The referee should concentrate on action around the ball carrier—especially the quarterback.
4. The referee should delay moving toward the line of scrimmage due to a possible reverse or some delayed play. He/she must be mindful that players not get behind him/her. It is also important to maintain the wide view, especially on cut blocking. Keep the play boxed in so that all players are in view.
5. As always after the play, be alert for dead-ball fouls and actions on the perimeter of the play.

UMPIRE DUTIES:

1. The umpire has several tasks for this situation that should be done prior to the snap.
2. As for every play, the umpire and the other officials should be aware of down and distance and field location. The officials should be aware of the offense's formation. This will determine play selection and aid in anticipating run or pass plays.
3. He/she must identify offensive players in the FBZ and on the line of scrimmage. Once the formation is set, there is usually little change. An end might move into or out of the FBZ and teams may shift into scrimmage kick formation on occasion. It is important to note the uniform numbers of the players as well as position. It is possible that a player(s) numbered 50-79 could be in the backfield or on the end to increase blocking and not be in the FBZ.
4. Identifying defensive players in the FBZ and on the line of scrimmage is a little more challenging. Defensive players may line up anywhere on or behind their line of scrimmage. In fact, the defense is not required by the rules to have any player at the line of scrimmage. There is usually movement of players in and out of the FBZ and on and off the line of scrimmage prior to the snap. The umpire needs to note the jersey number of defensive players in the FBZ and on the line of scrimmage. The referee and wings may have to help on determining the status of the defensive ends and/or outside linebackers.
5. At the snap, the umpire has to quickly determine the point of attack and the type of play (run/pass, etc.). The point of attack is where many blocks will occur and the possibility of illegal blocks is greater.
6. The positioning of the umpire is the same as most scrimmage plays - three to eight yards behind the defensive line of scrimmage. The umpire needs to be able to see the ball and the entire FBZ. He/she needs to be able to find the point of attack, see the blocking from the beginning and to know when the ball leaves the FBZ. Each umpire has to determine the best distance from the defensive line of scrimmage that will provide the best view for him/her. We think that to be six to eight yards as we think a wide view is better. There is such a thing as being too close to a play and not seeing a foul that may be obvious to everyone else, including your fellow officials

WING OFFICIALS DUTIES:

1. First and foremost is to recognize the limits of the FBZ. This is done prior to the snap by locating the snapper and then counting linemen toward the sideline. A balanced scrimmage line formation probably indicates the FBZ is inside the outside shoulder of the tight end. An unbalanced line will extend the FBZ on the weak side to include a one-yard space outside the tight end.
2. Be aware of changes in the formation prior to the snap, as this could offset the offensive balance of the linemen in the FBZ.
3. Keep in mind that a direct snap to the back under the snapper will increase the time the football remains in the FBZ. Any snap from a shotgun formation will greatly decrease the opportunity the time for legal below-the-waist blocking to occur in the FBZ.
4. Prior to the snap, locate defensive linemen outside the limits of the FBZ. Be aware of defensive players blitzing at the snap. They must be within one yard of the line of scrimmage to be legally blocked below the waist and then only by offensive linemen in the FBZ at the snap.
5. After the snap, attention to blocking techniques must be given to players or individual keys in each official's area of responsibility. These may include split ends, wing backs, slot backs and offensive players in motion, linebackers, ends and blitzing defensive players.
6. The type of play will also dictate where attention to blocking techniques is focused. On pass plays, cut blocks are seldom noticed with the exception of those by blocking backs protecting the passer and then on blitzing defensive players.

BACK JUDGE DUTIES:

1. If a cut block/below-the-waist block occurs in his area, it has to be illegal. We can think of no scenario in which it could be a legal block.
2. The back judge has an excellent position to view offensive wide-outs coming back toward the line and perhaps blocking illegally.

SUMMARY

It is very important to call the first illegal-block foul that an official sees. There are differing opinions if the contact is marginal. Judgment would be involved in making this call or not making the call. If a coach questions making a foul call on a marginal illegal block, the best reply is "Coach, I am protecting the players." Any coach would have a difficult time arguing that we should not protect players. Football is a team game. Therefore, it is very important to remember that the officiating crew must function as a team at all times.

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