



## 2011 FOOTBALL POINT OF EMPHASIS

### **CONCUSSIONS, CONTACT BOTH TO AND WITH THE HELMET, AND HELMET TECHNOLOGY AND PROPER HELMET FITTING**

As part of a long standing commitment to the minimization of risk for football participants, the NFHS Football Rules Committee has chosen to issue a single point of emphasis for 2011. This point of emphasis melds concerns about 1) concussion and the risks of initiating contact with and to the helmet; 2) contact initiated above the shoulders, particularly contact to the helmet, both by the person receiving the contact, and the person delivering the contact; and 3) proper helmet fitting. This unified emphasis continues a long-standing priority of the NFHS Football Rules Committee placing the health and safety of the individual participants above any other concern when writing and enforcing its rules code.

### **CONCUSSIONS**

Concussions continue to be a focus of attention in football at all levels of competition. The NFHS has been at the forefront of national sports organizations in emphasizing the importance of concussion education, recognition and proper management during the past several years. In addition, High School Reporting Information Online (RIO) and the National High School Sports Related Injury Surveillance Study provide the NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) with information about concussion rates and mechanisms. Among the most concerning data from the 2010 high school football season were that concussions accounted for more than 20 percent of all injuries reported and that **60 percent of all concussions were the direct result of helmet-to-helmet contact!**

Discussion of proper concussion management at all levels of play in all sports has led to the adoption of rules changes and concussion-specific policies by several athletic organizations, state associations and school districts. There has also been a focus within the medical community to standardize concussion diagnosis and management protocols and increase the level of awareness regarding appropriate concussion management. Governing bodies at all levels of play continue to review and revise playing rules and encourage practices that decrease the risk of concussion. In addition, this awareness has led to concussion legislation in a number of states. Some state associations have already established effective prevention and education programs. Coaches and officials are being trained to become familiar with the signs and symptoms of a concussed athlete so that appropriate steps can be taken to safeguard the health and safety of participants.

All coaches should undergo education and utilize available professional development tools regarding the signs and symptoms of concussion and the proper management of athletes with a suspected concussion. The NFHS offers the free course “Concussion in Sports: What You Need to Know” that is available at [www.nfhslearn.com](http://www.nfhslearn.com), and many states have developed their own education programs. It is incumbent upon coaches to lead by example in recognizing the seriousness of all suspected concussions.

Athletes must know that they should never try to “tough out” a suspected concussion. Teammates, parents and coaches should never encourage an athlete to “play through” the symptoms of a concussion. In addition, there should never be an attribution of bravery associated with athletes who

play despite having concussion signs or symptoms. The risks of such behavior must be emphasized to all members of the team, as well as all coaches and parents. If an athlete returns to activity before being fully healed from an initial concussion, the athlete is at risk for a repeat concussion. A repeat concussion that occurs before the brain has a chance to recover from the first can slow recovery or increase the chance for long-term problems. In rare cases, a repeat concussion can result in severe swelling and bleeding in the brain that can be fatal.

### **CONTACT BOTH TO AND WITH THE HELMET**

Over the years the NFHS Football Rules Committee has repeatedly emphasized the need to keep the **HEAD OUT OF FOOTBALL**, due to the potential for catastrophic head and neck injuries. Some form of helmet review or illegal helmet contact emphasis has been specifically targeted by the committee in its publications for review by coaches and officials 22 times since 1980. In the past few years, all levels of football have increased the focus on decreasing the risk of concussion, and it is widely conceded that one of the biggest steps in this effort is to eliminate direct helmet-to-helmet contact and any other contact both by and to the helmet.

Any initiation of contact with the helmet is illegal; therefore, there must be a focus on enforcing the existing rules. This year, the committee is taking the step to emphasize all types of illegal helmet contact:

- **Spearing** – an act by an offensive or defensive player who initiates contact against any opponent with the top of his helmet.
- **Face Tackling** – an act by a defensive player who initiates contact with a runner with the front of his helmet.
- **Butt Blocking** – an act by an offensive or defensive player who initiates contact against an opponent who is not a runner with the front of his helmet.

The committee is encouraging a renewed emphasis by both coaches and officials on other types of contact with and to the helmet, which are prohibited by the existing three rules cited above, as well as the unnecessary roughness provisions of Rule 9, which include:

- **Blows to the Head by the Defender** – Any act by a defensive player using the hand(s) to slap the opponent's head is illegal. A blocker may not initiate contact with his arm or hand against an opponent above the opponent's shoulder.
- **Initiating Contact to the Head** – It is illegal for a member of either team to use any other part of the body or equipment to initiate contact to the head. Contact to the helmet of another player could be one of the three specific illegal helmet contact fouls, or it could also be a personal foul for unnecessary roughness as defined by Rule 9-4-3g. This is not limited to acts by the defense (such as the defensive back making the "big hit" on the receiver, or the linebacker making the blow against a back out of the backfield), but such prohibition against contact to the helmet extends to all players on all parts of the field. When in doubt, it should be a foul.
- **Helmet-to-Helmet Contact** – Particularly in light of the recent RIO data findings, initiated acts of helmet-to-helmet contact must be penalized when they occur in contests, and must be corrected immediately if observed in practice. Contact initiated by one player with the helmet to the helmet of another player could be one of the three specific illegal helmet contact fouls, or it could also be a personal foul for unnecessary roughness as defined by Rule 9-4-3g. While inadvertent contact between helmets may occur in close line play or as players are closely engaged, all involved must be aware when the proverbial "line has been crossed," and an illegal act has occurred. When in doubt, it should be ruled a foul.
- **Making Initial Contact with the Defender while Running with the Head Down** – This act by the runner lowering his helmet to spear an opponent is not legal per Rule 9-4-3i, but needs special emphasis to help with risk minimization.

The illegal acts noted above have no place in the game, and the committee believes that renewed emphasis on getting illegal acts out of the game will improve player safety. When in doubt, these acts should be viewed as illegal. Coaches and officials must focus on:

- **Teaching** – Coaches must reinforce, through continual repetition, the proper techniques associated with blocking, tackling and running. Officials must learn to recognize the illegal aspects of these techniques and ensure that study is done by all officials on the crew and within the local association.
- **Recognition** – Because of the increased focus on head injury, officials and coaches must realize that helmet-to-helmet and illegal helmet contact fouls need to be consistently recognized and called throughout the game. It is imperative that officials and coaches also focus not only on the contact **WITH** the helmet, but any contact **TO** the helmet.
- **Calling/Enforcing** – Once recognized, officials must penalize these illegal acts consistently throughout the game, without warning, regardless of the situation. Whether it is in the first quarter of the first game, or overtime of the state championship, illegal helmet contact must be enforced and must be removed from the game by both coaches and officials. It is hoped that this simplified approach will be a positive step toward reinforcing player safety!

## **HELMET TECHNOLOGY AND PROPER HELMET FITTING**

The heightened concern about concussions and the variety of football helmets available have led participants and coaches to seek a helmet that they believe will protect a player from concussion. While many new football helmets incorporate new materials and designs, no football helmet is comprehensively protective against concussion. Therefore, it is incumbent upon athletic administrators, coaches, parents and participants to understand the limitations of all protective equipment, including the helmet. **Everyone must** realize that a combination of best practices, including but not limited to, repeated instruction on proper tackling and blocking techniques, proper helmet fitting and equipment tracking/recertification procedures, are the keys to limiting injury risk and must be emphasized within each program.

All persons involved with interscholastic football (including, but not limited to, school administrators, coaches, athletic trainers and officials, as well as the student-athletes themselves) share the responsibility for promoting health and safety. Among these responsibilities is the proper care and fitting of the helmet and other equipment. Each year, there exists the possibility that ill-fitted helmets and other equipment may contribute to a number of unnecessary injuries to these student-athletes. **Everyone involved with football has responsibility and should do the following:**

- School administrators must provide the means to obtain and maintain an adequate supply of safe and appropriate equipment. In times when there are economic challenges in interscholastic athletics, school officials must ensure that decisions regarding helmet maintenance are made within the required standards and are not budget-based decisions;
- Coaches and athletic trainers must use due diligence and care when fitting their athletes with that equipment, as well as instructing them how to correctly use such equipment;
- Athletes must also take an active role in the proper fitting, wear and use of that equipment;
- Game officials are responsible for effectively administering the rules pertaining to the use and wearing of legal/illegal and required equipment during the football contests.

The helmet (with accompanying facemask) must display two labels: (1) a warning label and (2) NOCSAE certification. It must have a chin-strap with at least four attachment points, and all four points must be securely fastened when the helmet is being used. The helmet, including facemask and chin-strap, cannot be altered, as per its manufacturer's intended design, and (if desired) can only be fitted with a face-shield that is constructed of a rigid, molded material that is free of any tint whatsoever (an appropriate health-care professional's note cannot supersede this rule). Helmets, face masks and chin-straps that are cracked, altered or otherwise broken must not be allowed to be worn.

Every football helmet manufacturer provides various helmet-fitting pamphlets with each helmet sold, detailing how to fit the helmet. If the helmet-fitting pamphlets or other football helmet-related instructions are missing, please contact the respective football helmet manufacturer and obtain replacements.