



Stay Out of The Gar Hole: Penalty Enforcement

SATASO Football

August 18, 2025

Before we dive in...

- We spent 2024 in deep discussion on the quality of the fouls we call
- Through the season, total numbers fell
- Roughly 15% of all fouls scored as not quality or incorrect
- We are inching closer to a SA Standard for key fouls
- Adopt this mindset: **clear and convincing beats close and correct**

Rule 10 is your friend

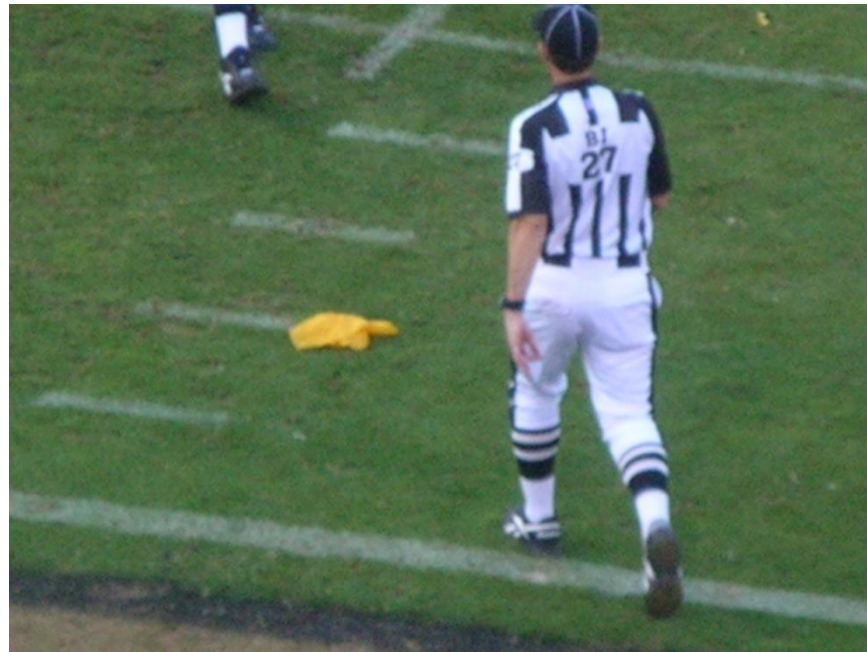
- Shortest of the 10 rules
- Source of most rules misapplications
- It's worthless to know every other rule in the book without mastering Rule 10
- Can't learn Rule 10 in a vacuum
 - Rule 2 is the most important one in the book to master
 - Rule 9 collects and restates all penalties not covered in Rules 3 through 8

Building blocks of penalty enforcement

- Live-ball or dead-ball
- Enforcement spots determined by the type of play
 - Running plays
 - Passing plays
 - Free kick plays
 - Scrimmage kick plays
 - Loose-ball situations
 - Scoring plays
- Half-the-distance enforcement procedures

Live-ball or dead-ball fouls

- In interest of time, we will presume you know the difference between dead-ball fouls, live-ball fouls, and live-ball fouls enforced as dead-ball fouls.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

Enforcement spots are easy

- Previous spot
 - Spot of the foul
 - Succeeding spot (most often used for dead-ball foul enforcement)
 - Spot where the run ends
 - Postscrimmage kick spot
-
- These are the only five possible enforcement spots

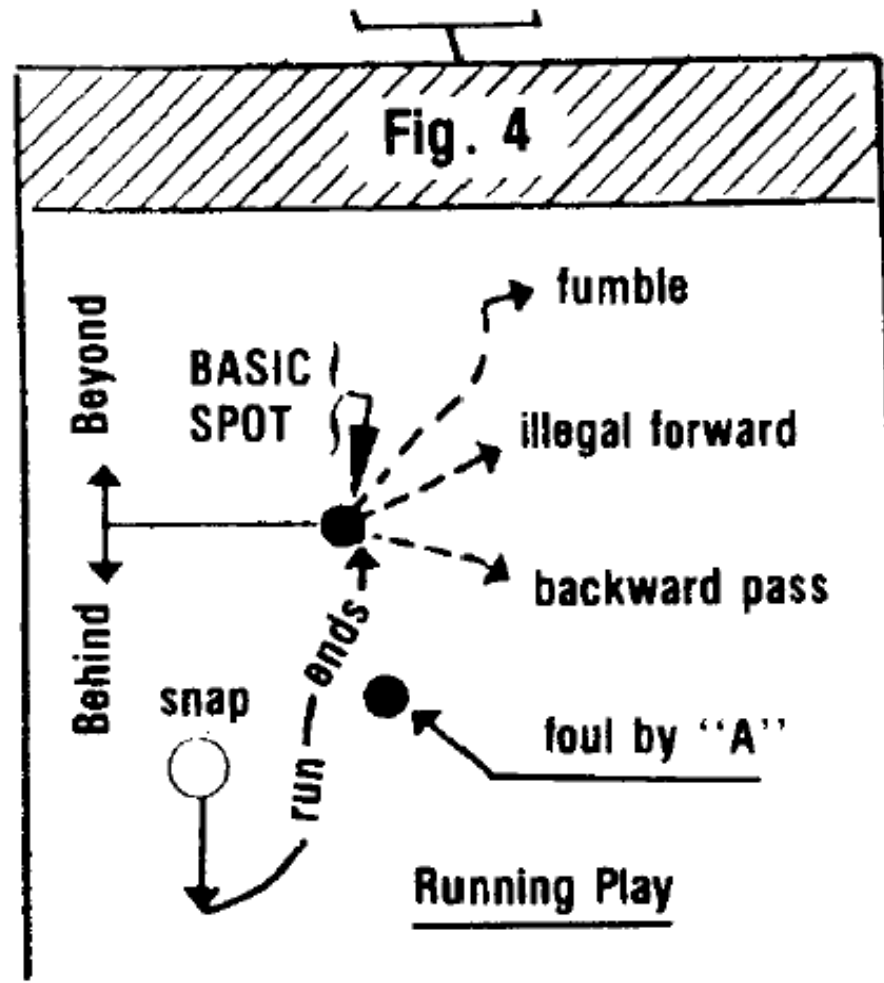
Basic spots determined by the type of play

- Running plays
 - That end behind the neutral zone – PREVIOUS SPOT
 - That end beyond the neutral zone – END OF THE RELATED RUN/3-and-1
 - That have no neutral zone – END OF THE RELATED RUN/3-and-1
- All other plays involve a loose ball (passes and kicks)
 - Pass plays – PREVIOUS SPOT
 - Free kicks – PREVIOUS SPOT
 - Scrimmage kicks – PREVIOUS SPOT UNLESS POSTSCRIMMAGE KICK RULES APPLY
- EVERY FOOTBALL PLAY CAN CONTAIN RUNS AND LOOSE BALL INTERVALS

What the *&%\$ is three-and-one?

- Enforcement philosophy based on giving a team in possession of the ball all the yardage they gained without assistance of a foul
- The “one” in three-and-one is a foul by team in possession behind the basic spot (that one is enforced from the spot of the foul)
- All fouls by the Team NOT in possession: enforce from the basic spot
- Fouls by the team in possession:
 - Enforce from the basic spot if the spot of the foul is beyond the basic spot
 - Enforce from the spot of the foul if the spot is behind the basic spot
- Only exception to three-and-one is never ever enforce a Team A foul from behind the previous spot

Consider this simple picture



Running plays that end behind neutral zone

- A's ball, 1/10 at the 50 yard line. Ball snapped to QB A1, who hands the ball off legally in the backfield to RB A20. A20 carries for a two-yard loss to the A48 yard line. A76 was called for holding B98 at the line of scrimmage.
 - RESULT: A's ball, 1/20 after 10-yard holding enforced from previous spot
- Pure straight previous spot enforcement, no matter which team live-ball fouls

Running plays that end beyond neutral zone

- A's ball, 1/10 at the A20 yard line. Ball snapped to QB A1, who hands the ball off legally in the backfield to RB A20. A20 carries to the A45 yard line where he is tackled. During the run:
 - DE B90 goes hands to the face against A75. Foul by team not in possession. ENFORCE 15 yards from the basic spot, A's ball 1/10 at B40.
 - WR A88 holds B34 at midfield. Foul occurs beyond basic spot (end of related run). ENFORCE 10 yards from the basic spot. A's ball 1/10 at A35.
 - TE A85 holds B49 at the A37 yard line. Foul occurs beyond the neutral zone and behind the basic spot (end of related run). ENFORCE 10 yards against Team A from the A36. A's ball 1/3 at A27.
- Three-and-one enforcement

Passing plays

- 2-19-1 states “a pass continues to be a pass until it is caught or intercepted by a player or the ball becomes dead.”
- Fouls committed by Team A between the time the ball is snapped and the pass ends are enforced from the previous spot.
- Some fouls committed by Team B between the time the ball is snapped and the pass ends are enforced from the previous spot.
 - Exceptions for legal forward pass plays:
 - Team B personal fouls during that interval are enforced from end of last run if last run ends beyond the neutral zone & no change of team possession during the down
 - If pass crosses the neutral zone and Team B commits contact foul against an eligible receiver before the ball is touched, the penalty includes a first down.

Fouls during free kicks by Team A

- Previous spot enforcement
 - EXCEPTION: kick-catch interference enforced from the spot of the foul
 - EXCEPTION: free kick out of bounds can be 5 yards from previous spot and re-kick OR B takes the ball at the out of bounds spot OR B takes the ball 30 yards from where it was kicked
 - EXCEPTION: illegal formation, illegal block, offside can be enforced 5 yards from previous spot and re-kick OR 5 yards from the subsequent dead ball spot
- CAREFUL: What if Team A is offside AND the free kick goes out of bounds untouched? Remember only one live-ball foul per team per play can be enforced.

Fouls during free kicks by Team B

- Previous spot enforcement
 - EXCEPTION: illegal wedge formation is enforced 15 yards from spot of the foul (unless three-and-one applies)

Fouls during scrimmage kicks by Team A

- Previous spot enforcement
 - EXCEPTION: kick-catch interference enforced from the spot of the foul
 - EXCEPTION: Team A fouls in their own end zone results in a safety
 - EXCEPTION: so long as the ball belongs to Team B when it becomes dead, Team B can “tack on” Team A fouls to the end of the play
- A’s ball, 4/15 at midfield. At the snap, guard A23 fires out and wraps up tackle B95 and takes him to the ground. Flag thrown for holding. B10 fair-catches the punt at his own 20 yard line.
 - RESULT: B accepts the penalty, 10 yards for offensive holding, penalty enforced from the 50 back to the A40, A’s ball 4/25 **OR** B accepts the penalty and takes the ball 1/10 at their own 30 (after a 10 yard walkoff from the end of the subsequent dead ball spot since B was in possession).

Fouls during scrimmage kicks by Team B

- Previous spot unless postscrimmage kick enforcement applies
- PSK applies to Team B fouls if and only if all of these are present:
 - Scrimmage kick crosses the neutral zone (doesn't apply to a try, successful field goal, or in extra periods)
 - Team B foul occurs before the end of the kick
 - Team B will next put the ball in play
- If PSK applies, Team B fouls are enforced by the three-and-one principle

Team B fouls where PSK applies

- Team A punts from A30 yard line. B20 catches the punt at his own 40 yard line and runs the ball back to the 50 yard line. During the kick:
- B34 holds gunner A25 at the A30 yard line
 - RESULT: B penalized 10 yards for defensive holding. Penalty is enforced from the PSK spot, which is the beanbag spot for the end of the kick. So it will be Team B's ball, 1/10, at their own 30 yard line.

Fouls involving change of possession

- Clean hands rule is your friend. On downs that involve a change of team possession, the team gaining possession will only keep the ball if they did not foul before gaining possession
 - EXAMPLE: B98 is lined up in neutral zone at the snap. A10 throws a pick-six to B34. RESULT: Team A will accept 5 yard penalty from previous spot and keep the ball. Team B did not have clean hands when they got the ball.
- Order of occurrence when both teams foul is very important
 - EXAMPLE: Team A has five men in the backfield at the snap. A10 throws an interception to B34. After B34 has caught the pass and has started his run, B45 blocks below the waist. B34 is tackled without scoring
 - RESULT: Team B will decline Team A's illegal formation penalty and keep the ball. Team A will, in turn, accept 3-and-1 enforcement of B45's low block.

Fouls during or after TD, FG, or try

- Touchdown plays
 - 15-yard fouls (PF / USC) enforced on the try, kickoff, or succeeding spot in OT
 - 5-yard and 10-yard fouls are declined by rule
- Defensive pass interference on a try is half the distance
- Team B fouls on successful Team A field goals
 - Team A can cancel the score and accept the Team B penalty
 - Team A can keep the score and accept Team B penalty for PF / USC to be enforced on the kickoff (or succeeding spot in OT)
- Fouls on try downs
 - Go master rules 8-3-3, 8-3-4, and 8-3-5

Mechanics matter

- Accurate placement of the flag is important
- Accurate placement of the beanbag on fumbles and ends of scrimmage kicks are important
- Don't beanbag a backward pass—you'll never need that spot
- Keep officiating after you throw your flag
- For the love of all that is holy, never ever lose the yard line for the end of a play

Proper enforcement starts with foul reporting

- Calling official(s) needs to communicate all the necessary information
 - What is the foul?
 - Name of the foul and a description of the illegal action warranting the flag
 - Who committed the foul?
 - Team and player number
 - When was the foul committed?
 - Before the snap, during the run/pass/kick/fumble/loose backward pass/etc, before or after the score
- Referee has to synthesize that information
 - Are there other fouls/violations on the play?
 - Determine the enforcement, possession, down, clock status

You too can be a good enforcer

- Always know the status of the ball when you have a foul
- Learn about three-and-one and clean hands
- If you get confused, try thinking about how the play would be end up without the foul
- Develop a procedure on your crew for how foul information is reported
- Don't apply PSK on a free kick
- Don't offset a live-ball foul with a dead-ball foul