GENERAL

ihsa football rules

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Understanding IHSA Football Rules: A Complete Guide for Coaches, Players, and Parents

High school football in Illinois is governed by a comprehensive set of regulations that ensure safety, fairness, and excitement for all participants. The Illinois High School Association (IHSA) publishes these rules each season, updating them to reflect changes in the sport, advances in player safety, and feedback from coaches and schools. Whether you're a new coach preparing your first team, a player eager to learn the nuances of the game, or a parent who wants to support your child's athletic journey, this guide will walk you through the essential aspects of IHSA football regulations.

Why the IHSA Matters in High School Football

High school athletics are more than just games; they're community events that foster teamwork, discipline, and school pride. The IHSA's role is to set a consistent framework that all Illinois schools must follow. This consistency guarantees that every student-athlete competes under the same conditions, whether they're on a small-town team or a large metropolitan program.

Beyond the basics, the IHSA places a strong emphasis on **player safety**—an area that has seen significant evolution in recent years. From helmet requirements to tackling restrictions, the rules are designed to reduce injuries while preserving the integrity of the sport.

Core Components of the IHSA Football Rulebook

While the rulebook is extensive, it can be broken down into several core categories that most stakeholders should understand:

- Field and Equipment Specifications
- Game Structure and Timing
- Offensive and Defensive Play Rules
- Scoring and Advancement
- Penalties and Disciplinary Actions
- Safety and Medical Protocols

Below, we explore each of these sections in depth.

Field and Equipment Specifications

The playing field and equipment are foundational to every high school football game. The IHSA sets strict standards to ensure fairness and safety.

Fields must be a minimum of 120 yards long and 53 1/3 yards wide, matching the dimensions of an NFL field. The goal line sits 10 yards from the end zone, and the end zone itself is 10 yards deep. All yardage lines, hash marks, and the center circle are marked in accordance with the association's guidelines.

Uniforms must be school-identified, with a clear color scheme and logos that do not clash. The IHSA mandates that all players wear approved helmets, shoulder pads, mouthguards, and, for defensive players, protective eyewear if necessary. The helmets must meet the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) certification for high school

sports.

Before every game, a certified equipment inspector—typically a school administrator or a designated IHSA official—must verify that all gear meets safety standards. Any equipment deemed unsafe is either repaired or replaced before the game can commence.

Game Structure and Timing

The structure of an IHSA football game is designed to provide a balanced and engaging experience for players and fans alike.

A standard game consists of two halves, each lasting 30 minutes. The halftime break lasts 15 minutes, giving teams time to regroup, receive coaching, and allow players to recover.

- The game clock starts at the snap of the ball and stops for various reasons, such as incomplete passes, out-of-bounds plays, or penalties.
- After a score, the clock restarts at the kickoff, or the ball is placed on the 25-yard line if the score was a touchdown.
- The IHSA allows for a 4-second count for the offense to snap the ball, ensuring the game proceeds at a brisk pace.

In the event of a tie at the end of regulation, the IHSA employs a modified sudden-death format. Each team gets a possession from the opponent's 25-yard line. If the game remains tied after both teams have had an opportunity, the process repeats until a winner emerges. Importantly, teams are required to switch sides of the field after each possession to maintain fairness.

Offensive and Defensive Play Rules

Understanding the intricacies of offensive and defensive play is essential for coaches and players alike. The IHSA rulebook contains detailed regulations on player positioning, blocking techniques, and permissible contact.

Every player must meet the IHSA's eligibility criteria, which include academic requirements, age limits, and a minimum number of years of participation. Positions are broadly categorized into offense, defense, and special teams. Each position has specific responsibilities, and players are typically assigned roles based on skill sets and team strategy.

Blocking is a cornerstone of offensive play. The IHSA permits blocking in the chest, shoulder, and upper body regions but prohibits:

- Blocking below the waist (except for certain defensive players in specific contexts).
- Using the head or helmet to initiate contact.
- Blocking from the back or in a manner that could cause a head injury.

Defensive players, on the other hand, are allowed to tackle in the shoulder region but must avoid contact with the helmet or neck area.

Proper tackling technique is vital for player safety. Coaches are encouraged to emphasize:

- Keeping the head up to avoid head-on collisions.
- Using the arms to wrap the opponent's body.
- Avoiding shoulder-to-helmet contact.

Violations of tackling rules result in penalties such as unsportsmanlike conduct or safety infractions, depending on severity.

Scoring and Advancement

Scoring is the ultimate objective of any football game, and the IHSA clarifies how points are awarded and how ball advancement is measured.

A touchdown is worth six points. After a touchdown, the scoring team has the option to attempt an extra point (kick) for one point or a two-point conversion from the 2-yard line. Field goals, attempted from anywhere on the field, are worth three points.

A safety occurs when the defensive team tackles an offensive player in the ball carrier's own end zone, awarding two points to the defense. Interceptions are awarded to the defensive team when they catch a forward pass intended for an offensive player. The team that secures the interception can attempt a return for additional points.

Kickoffs are executed from the kicking team's 35-yard line. The receiving team must catch the ball and can attempt a return. The IHSA allows for a 10-yard penalty on the kicking team if the ball is returned for a touchdown, ensuring fairness in kickoff returns.

Penalties and Disciplinary Actions

Penalties are the mechanism by which the IHSA enforces rules and ensures the game remains fair and safe. Understanding common penalties can help teams avoid costly mistakes.

1. Offside – A player crosses the line of scrimmage before the ball is snapped.
2. False Start – An offensive player moves or fakes a start before the snap.
3. Illegal Blocking – Blocking below the waist or using prohibited body parts.
4. Pass Interference – Contact with a receiver before the ball arrives.
5. Unsportsmanlike Conduct – Aggressive or violent behavior beyond normal play.

Most penalties result in a yardage loss or gain. For example, an offside penalty typically results in a 5-yard loss for the offending team. In cases of severe violations, the IHSA may impose additional sanctions, such as ejection of players or suspension of coaches.

Coaches are required to file a disciplinary report if they believe a player or opponent has violated safety protocols. The IHSA reviews these reports and may impose fines, suspensions, or other penalties. Transparency and accountability are key to maintaining a safe playing environment.

Safety and Medical Protocols

Player health is a top priority in high school football. The IHSA has implemented rigorous safety guidelines that schools must follow.

All schools must have a concussion protocol in place, including immediate removal from play, medical evaluation, and a graduated return-to-play plan. Coaches and athletic trainers are trained to recognize concussion symptoms and to act swiftly.

During hot or humid conditions, the IHSA recommends additional hydration breaks, early start times, or even postponement of games if temperatures exceed safe thresholds. The association's guidelines help prevent heat-related illnesses.

Every game must have a certified first-aid responder on site, along with a functional ambulance or rapid transport plan. The IHSA mandates that teams have a designated medical personnel list and that all staff are trained in basic emergency care.

Special Situations: Kickoffs, Punts, and Turnovers

While the core rules cover most play scenarios, certain special situations require additional attention.

Kickoffs are executed from the 35-yard line, and the ball must travel at least 10 yards before the receiving team can touch it. Punts are typically executed from the team's own 30-yard line, with the receiving team allowed to field the ball anywhere on the field. The IHSA provides detailed rules on blocking during punts to prevent dangerous blocks.

Turnovers occur when a team loses possession due to a fumble or interception. The IHSA requires that the ball be declared dead if it rolls out of bounds or is recovered by the opposing team. The team that recovers the ball then has the opportunity to advance the ball from the spot of recovery.

After a play ends, the ball is considered dead until the next snap. The IHSA clarifies that players must remain in their respective zones until the ball is live again, preventing illegal advances or interference.

Coaching Strategies within IHSA Rules

Understanding the rulebook is only part of coaching success; applying it strategically can elevate a team's performance.

Coaches should design a playbook that balances run and pass options, ensuring the defense cannot predict the play. The IHSA allows for a wide variety of formations, but coaches must remain mindful of illegal formations like "illegal motion" or "illegal shift."

Defensive play-calling should emphasize tackling technique, gap integrity, and coverage responsibilities. Coaches are encouraged to run drills that reinforce safe tackling practices and proper blocking angles.

Special teams often decide games. Coaches should prioritize kickoff coverage, punt return strategies, and field goal protection. The IHSA's rules on blocking and return yardage provide a framework for creating effective special teams units.

Parental Involvement and the IHSA Framework

Parents play

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