



April 29, 2026

NFHS Soccer Weekly Rule Interpretations

As we enter the postseason, this final interpretation serves as a reminder of the importance of consistency, fairness, and sportsmanship in all contests. Let's continue to represent the values of high school athletics with respect, integrity, and excellence both on and off the field. Have a great championship season.

Time-Wasting

Time-wasting is a frequent occurrence and may be more prevalent in playoff matches due to the competitive context, generally originating from the leading team or sometimes from teams attempting to play for a draw to force overtime or kicks from the penalty mark. This behavior can take multiple forms, some are legal, and others are illegal. All time-wasting tactics fall into one of three categories: maintaining possession of a live ball for as long as possible, interrupting flow by forcing a live ball to become dead or extending the length of stoppages on a dead ball.

There are several recognizable legal methods teams can use to "run out the clock," such as playing the ball into the corner and shielding it from opponents or maintaining possession by playing "keep-away" and passing back and forth between teammates. Goalkeepers may also legally control the ball with their feet after making a save, thereby forcing opponents into close proximity to challenge before they finally pick up the ball with their hands. Furthermore, kicking a live ball a long distance out of play or simply walking instead of running to retrieve a ball that has gone out of play are legal actions that officials should recognize as forms of gamesmanship to waste time.

While utilizing possession and shielding tactics are legal, officials must be vigilant to address unfair and illegal tactics that detract from the game's integrity. Illegal time-wasting includes goalkeepers holding the ball with their hands for longer than the six-second allowance before releasing it into play or catching the ball and then falling to the ground, incorrectly assuming their time limit only begins when they are standing. Other illegal methods involve excessive delays on restarts, such as taking unnecessary time to set up a free kick by repositioning the ball, tying a shoe, or adjusting a uniform. Players may also illegally waste time by kicking or throwing the ball away to prevent the opposing team from restarting play quickly or employ the seemingly innocuous act of standing in front of the free kick to prevent a quick kick. When unfair time-wasting tactics are encountered, officials have a powerful tool to discourage and

stop these actions by stopping the clock at their discretion, effectively neutralizing the advantage gained from the delay. Additionally, officials may sanction illegal time-wasting tactics that are also considered misconduct (like delaying the restart, encroachment, or unsporting conduct).

Tie-Breaking Procedures

For officials managing post-season soccer matches, knowing and properly following the correct tie-breaking procedures is critically important, particularly if single-elimination events determine which team advances and whose season ends. When post-season matches must have a winner, referees should be familiar with the correct tie-breaking procedures before the game begins. These procedures involve structured steps and may vary from state to state or between leagues. Prudent officials will bring printed copies of the proper tie-breaking procedures for reference. An example of proactive officiating would be to remind teams of the tie-breaking procedures before the game when meeting with coaches and captains.

Officials need to know the proper tie-breaking steps and ask for clarification before accepting post-season assignments if there is any confusion. Is there overtime? If so, how much time is played in overtime? Is overtime played in its entirety, or does it end after the first goal is scored? How are penalty kicks managed: who is eligible, how many kicks or sets of kicks are completed? What about misconduct penalties during penalty kicks to determine a winner? Given the complexity of the procedures, especially concerning the gravity of post-season matches, officials must implement the tie-breaking procedures correctly to ensure fairness. There is no excuse for the officiating crew not to follow the correct protocols. Getting this process right is a core component of the essential officiating qualities of courage, character, and consistency, ensuring a fair outcome in high-stakes elimination contests.

Tactical Fouls

Tactical fouls are deliberate offenses committed by a player that disrupt the opposing team's progress, specifically impacting play by either interrupting or stopping a promising attack (SPA) or denying an obvious goal-scoring opportunity (DOGSO). Unlike other sports, say basketball, where tactical strategies include fouling opponents to force a change of possession, soccer expressly prohibits tactical fouls. Recognizing these subtle, and sometimes cynical, actions is critical for post-season officials to maintain fair competition. Unlike fouls involving excessive force, which result in an ejection (red card) regardless of the tactical impact, tactical fouls typically involve marginal contact and are usually non-violent in nature. Officials must maintain tactical awareness to recognize the offense's impact on the phase of play creating unfair advantages. A SPA foul is sanctioned with a caution (yellow card), and DOGSO fouls result in an ejection (red card).

To properly recognize tactical fouls, officials must maintain situational awareness and evaluate several criteria. Questions need to be asked as to the offense's impact and tactical nature:

- Where does the offense occur on the field?*
- Did the foul occur inside or outside the penalty area?*
- What is the distance between the offense and the goal?*
- What is the direction of play?*
- Does the player have control of the ball or the ability to gain control?*
- How many defenders are involved in the situation?*
- Where are they located?*
- How many attackers are involved in the situation?*
- Where are they located?*
- What are the attacker's options to pass the ball?*
- How much open space is there for the attacker to move?*

If no offense were to occur, would the player have an obvious opportunity to score a goal or continue with a promising attack?

Does the player deliberately handle the ball to deny the opposing team a goal or to stop a promising attack?

Was the offender attempting to play the ball?

While every obvious goal-scoring opportunity is also a promising attack, not all promising attacks are obvious goal-scoring opportunities. This means that determining obvious goal-scoring opportunities must pass a higher threshold than promising attacks. Officials must confirm that all four key criteria are present and obvious for an offense to be considered DOGSO:

- distance to goal
- direction of play
- likelihood of maintaining control
- and location/number of defenders.

If even one of those four criteria is not obviously present to the official, then the attacking team does not have an obvious goal-scoring opportunity; however, the presence of just one of those elements, amongst additional other SPA considerations, then the attack can be considered promising.

Lastly, the mandatory sanctions for DOGSO (red card) and SPA (yellow card) can be downgraded or even eliminated under specific conditions, primarily concerning the location of the foul and the actions of the attacker. Tactical foul sanctions are downgraded for offenses committed inside the penalty area, resulting in a penalty kick, and only when the offender attempted to play the ball. The most common downgrading scenario occurs when a DOGSO foul is committed inside the penalty area, a penalty kick is awarded, and the defender is deemed to be attempting to play the ball (e.g., a careless or reckless trip). In this specific case, the ejection (red card) is mitigated to a caution (yellow card). Conversely, if that same DOGSO foul inside the penalty area involved acts like holding, pulling, pushing, or deliberate handling – actions where there was no attempt to play the ball – the player must still be ejected (red

card). If a foul that stops a promising attack occurs inside the penalty area and results in a penalty kick, the offender is not cautioned if they were attempting to play the ball.

Attempted tactical fouls are also downgraded. For instance, if a defender attempts a tactical foul (DOGSO or SPA) but the attacking team manages to score anyway, the offender is not ejected for DOGSO; instead, they are generally cautioned (yellow card) for unsporting conduct, provided the contact was not excessive force. It is essential for officials to remember that reckless fouls and fouls committed with excessive force are never downgraded, irrespective of the foul's tactical nature, because the severity of the contact inherently mandates at least a caution or ejection, respectively.