

Interpretation
of the Laws of
the Game and
Guidelines for Referees

Basic requirements for a foul

The following conditions must be met for an offence to be considered a foul:

- it must be committed by a player
- it must occur on the field of play
- it must occur while the ball is in play

If the referee stops play due to an offence committed outside the field of play (when the ball is in play), play must be restarted with a dropped ball from the position of the ball when play was stopped, unless play was stopped inside the goal area, in which case the referee drops the ball on the goal area line parallel to the goal line at the point nearest to where the ball was located when play was stopped.

Careless, reckless, using excessive force

“Careless” means that the player has shown a lack of attention or consideration when making a challenge or that he acted without precaution.

- No further disciplinary sanction is needed if a foul is judged to be careless

“Reckless” means that the player has acted with complete disregard to the danger to, or consequences for, his opponent.

- A player who plays in a reckless manner must be cautioned

“Using excessive force” means that the player has far exceeded the necessary use of force and is in danger of injuring his opponent.

- A player who uses excessive force must be sent off

Charging an opponent

The act of charging is a challenge for space using physical contact within playing distance of the ball without using arms or elbows.

It is an offence to charge an opponent:

- in a careless manner
- in a reckless manner
- using excessive force

Holding an opponent

Holding an opponent includes the act of preventing him from moving past or around using the hands, the arms or the body.

Referees are reminded to make an early intervention and to deal firmly with holding offences especially inside the penalty area at corner kicks and free kicks.

To deal with these situations:

- the referee must warn any player holding an opponent before the ball is in play
- caution the player if the holding continues before the ball is in play
- award a direct free kick or penalty kick and caution the player if it happens once the ball is in play

If a defender starts holding an attacker outside the penalty area and continues holding him inside the penalty area, the referee must award a penalty kick.

Disciplinary sanctions

- A caution for unsporting behaviour must be issued when a player holds an opponent to prevent him gaining possession of the ball or taking up an advantageous position
- A player must be sent off if he denies an obvious goalscoring opportunity by holding an opponent
- No further disciplinary action must be taken in other situations of holding an opponent

Restart of play

- Direct free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick) or a penalty kick if the offence occurred inside the penalty area

Handling the ball

Handling the ball involves a deliberate act of a player making contact with the ball with his hand or arm. The referee must take the following into consideration:

- the movement of the hand towards the ball (not the ball towards the hand)
- the distance between the opponent and the ball (unexpected ball)
- the position of the hand does not necessarily mean that there is an infringement
- touching the ball with an object held in the hand (clothing, shinguard, etc.) counts as an infringement
- hitting the ball with a thrown object (boot, shinguard, etc.) counts as an infringement

Disciplinary sanctions

There are circumstances when a caution for unsporting behaviour is required when a player deliberately handles the ball, e.g. when a player:

- deliberately and blatantly handles the ball to prevent an opponent gaining possession
- attempts to score a goal by deliberately handling the ball

A player is sent off, however, if he prevents a goal or an obvious goalscoring opportunity by deliberately handling the ball. This punishment arises not from the act of the player deliberately handling the ball but from the unacceptable and unfair intervention that prevented a goal being scored.

Restart of play

- Direct free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick) or penalty kick

Outside his own penalty area, the goalkeeper has the same restrictions on handling the ball as any other player. Inside his own penalty area, the goalkeeper cannot be guilty of a handling offence incurring a direct free kick or any misconduct related to handling the ball. He can, however, be guilty of several handling offences that incur an indirect free kick.

Offences committed by goalkeepers

A goalkeeper is not permitted to keep control of the ball in his hands for more than six seconds. A goalkeeper is considered to be in control of the ball:

- while the ball is between his hands or between his hand and any surface (e.g. ground, own body)
- while holding the ball in his outstretched open hand
- while in the act of bouncing it on the ground or tossing it into the air

When a goalkeeper has gained possession of the ball with his hands, he cannot be challenged by an opponent.

A goalkeeper is not permitted to touch the ball with his hand inside his own penalty area in the following circumstances:

- if he handles the ball again after it has been released from his possession and has not touched any other player:
 - the goalkeeper is considered to be in control of the ball by touching it with any part of his hands or arms except if the ball rebounds accidentally from him, e.g. after he has made a save
 - possession of the ball includes the goalkeeper deliberately parrying the ball
- if he touches the ball with his hands after it has been deliberately kicked to him by a team-mate
- if he touches the ball with his hands after he has received it directly from a throw-in taken by a team-mate

Restart of play

- Indirect free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)

Offences committed against goalkeepers

- It is an offence for a player to prevent a goalkeeper from releasing the ball from his hands
- A player must be penalised for playing in a dangerous manner if he kicks or attempts to kick the ball when the goalkeeper is in the process of releasing it
- It is an offence to restrict the movement of the goalkeeper by unfairly impeding him, e.g. at the taking of a corner kick

Playing in a dangerous manner

Playing in a dangerous manner is defined as any action that, while trying to play the ball, threatens injury to someone (including the player himself). It is committed with an opponent nearby and prevents the opponent from playing the ball for fear of injury.

A scissors or bicycle kick is permissible provided that, in the opinion of the referee, it is not dangerous to an opponent.

Playing in a dangerous manner involves no physical contact between the players. If there is physical contact, the action becomes an offence punishable with a direct free kick or penalty kick. In the case of physical contact, the referee should carefully consider the high probability that misconduct has also been committed.

Disciplinary sanctions

- If a player plays in a dangerous manner in a “normal” challenge, the referee should not take any disciplinary action. If the action is made with obvious risk of injury, the referee should caution the player
- If a player denies an obvious goalscoring opportunity by playing in a dangerous manner, the referee should send off the player

Restart of play

- Indirect free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)
- If there is contact, a different offence has been committed, punishable by a direct free kick or penalty kick.

Impeding the progress of an opponent

Impeding the progress of an opponent means moving into the path of the opponent to obstruct, block, slow down or force a change of direction by an opponent when the ball is not within playing distance of either player.

All players have a right to their position on the field of play, being in the way of an opponent is not the same as moving into the way of an opponent.

Shielding the ball is permitted. A player who places himself between an opponent and the ball for tactical reasons has not committed an offence as long as the ball is kept within playing distance and the player does not hold off the opponent with his arms or body. If the ball is within playing distance, the player may be fairly charged by an opponent.

Delaying the restart of play to issue a card

Once the referee has decided to issue a card, whether to caution or send off a player, play must not be restarted until the sanction has been administered.

Cautions for unsporting behaviour

There are different circumstances when a player must be cautioned for unsporting behaviour, e.g. if a player:

- commits in a reckless manner one of the seven offences that incur a direct free kick
- commits a foul for the tactical purpose of interfering with or breaking up a promising attack
- holds an opponent for the tactical purpose of pulling the opponent away from the ball or preventing the opponent from getting to the ball
- handles the ball to prevent an opponent gaining possession or developing an attack (other than the goalkeeper within his own penalty area)
- handles the ball in an attempt to score a goal (irrespective of whether or not the attempt is successful).
- attempts to deceive the referee by feigning injury or pretending to have been fouled (simulation)
- changes places with the goalkeeper during play or without the referee's permission
- acts in a manner which shows a lack of respect for the game
- plays the ball when he is walking off the field of play after being granted permission to leave the field of play
- verbally distracts an opponent during play or at a restart
- makes unauthorised marks on the field of play
- uses a deliberate trick while the ball is in play to pass the ball to his own goalkeeper with his head, chest, knee, etc. in order to circumvent the Law, irrespective of whether the goalkeeper touches the ball with his hands or not. The offence is committed by the player in attempting to circumvent both the letter and the spirit of Law 12 and play is restarted with an indirect free kick
- uses a deliberate trick to pass the ball to his own goalkeeper to circumvent the Law while he is taking a free kick (after the player is cautioned, the free kick must be retaken)

Celebration of a goal

While it is permissible for a player to demonstrate his joy when a goal has been scored, the celebration must not be excessive.

Reasonable celebrations are allowed, but the practice of choreographed celebrations is not to be encouraged when it results in excessive time-wasting and referees are instructed to intervene in such cases.

A player must be cautioned if:

- in the opinion of the referee, he makes gestures which are provocative, derisory or inflammatory
- he climbs on to a perimeter fence to celebrate a goal being scored
- he removes his shirt or covers his head with his shirt
- he covers his head or face with a mask or other similar item

Leaving the field of play to celebrate a goal is not a cautionable offence in itself but it is essential that players return to the field of play as soon as possible.

Referees are expected to act in a preventative manner and to exercise common sense in dealing with the celebration of a goal.

Showing dissent by word or action

A player who is guilty of dissent by protesting (verbally or non-verbally) against a referee's decision must be cautioned.

The captain of a team has no special status or privileges under the Laws of the Game but he has a degree of responsibility for the behaviour of his team.

Delaying the restart of play

Referees must caution players who delay the restart of play by tactics such as:

- taking a free kick from the wrong position with the sole intention of forcing the referee to order a retake
- appearing to take a throw-in but suddenly leaving it to one of his teammates to take
- kicking the ball away or carrying it away with the hands after the referee has stopped play
- excessively delaying the taking of a throw-in or free kick
- delaying leaving the field of play when being substituted
- provoking a confrontation by deliberately touching the ball after the referee has stopped play

Persistent infringement

Referees should be alert at all times to players who persistently infringe the Laws. In particular, they must be aware that, even if a player commits a number of different offences, he must still be cautioned for persistently infringing the Laws.

There is no specific number of infringements which constitutes “persistence” or the presence of a pattern – this is entirely a matter of judgement and must be determined in the context of effective game management.

Serious foul play

A player is guilty of serious foul play if he uses excessive force or brutality against an opponent when challenging for the ball when it is in play.

A tackle that endangers the safety of an opponent must be sanctioned as serious foul play.

Any player who lunges at an opponent in challenging for the ball from the front, from the side or from behind using one or both legs, with excessive force and endangering the safety of an opponent is guilty of serious foul play.

Advantage should not be applied in situations involving serious foul play unless there is a clear subsequent opportunity to score a goal. The referee must send off the player guilty of serious foul play when the ball is next out of play.

A player who is guilty of serious foul play should be sent off and play is restarted with a direct free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick) or a penalty kick (if the offence occurred inside the offender's penalty area).

Violent conduct

A player is guilty of violent conduct if he uses excessive force or brutality against an opponent when not challenging for the ball.

He is also guilty of violent conduct if he uses excessive force or brutality against a team-mate, spectator, match official or any other person.

Violent conduct may occur either on the field of play or outside its boundaries, whether the ball is in play or not.

Advantage should not be applied in situations involving violent conduct unless there is a clear subsequent opportunity to score a goal. The referee must send off the player guilty of violent conduct when the ball is next out of play.

Referees are reminded that violent conduct often leads to mass confrontation, therefore they must try to avert this with active intervention.

A player, substitute or substituted player who is guilty of violent conduct must be sent off.

Restart of play

- If the ball is out of play, play is restarted according to the previous decision
- If the ball is in play and the offence occurred outside the field of play:
 - if the player is already off the field of play and commits the offence, play is restarted with a dropped ball from the position of the ball when play was stopped, unless play was stopped inside the goal area, in which case the referee drops the ball on the goal area line parallel to the goal line at the point nearest to where the ball was located when play was stopped
 - if the player leaves the field of play to commit the offence, play is restarted with an indirect free kick from the position of the ball when play was stopped (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)
- If the ball is in play and a player commits an offence inside the field of play:
 - against an opponent, play is restarted with a direct free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick) or a penalty kick (if inside the offending player's own penalty area)
 - against a team-mate, play is restarted with an indirect free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)
 - against a substitute or substituted player, play is restarted with an indirect free kick from the position of the ball when play was stopped (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)
 - against the referee or an assistant referee, play is restarted with an indirect free kick from the position where the offence occurred (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)
 - against another person, play is restarted with a dropped ball from the position of the ball when play was stopped, unless play was stopped inside the goal area, in which case the referee drops the ball on the goal area line parallel to the goal line at the point nearest to where the ball was located when play was stopped

Offences where an object (or the ball) is thrown

If while the ball is in play, a player, substitute or substituted player throws an object at an opponent or other person in a reckless manner, the referee must stop play and caution the player, substitute or substituted player.

If while the ball is in play, a player, substitute or substituted player throws an object at an opponent or other person using excessive force, the referee must stop play and send off the player, substitute or substituted player for violent conduct.

Restart of play

- If a player standing inside his own penalty area throws an object at an opponent standing outside the penalty area, the referee restarts play with a direct free kick to the opponents' team from the position where the object struck or would have struck the opponent
- If a player standing outside his own penalty area throws an object at an opponent standing inside the penalty area, the referee restarts play with a penalty kick
- If a player standing inside the field of play throws an object at any person standing outside the field of play, the referee restarts play with an indirect free kick from the position of the ball when play was stopped (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)
- If a player standing outside the field of play throws an object at an opponent standing inside the field of play, the referee restarts play with a direct free kick to the opponents' team from the position where the object struck or would have struck the opponent or with a penalty kick (if inside the offending player's own penalty area)
- If a substitute or substituted player standing outside the field of play throws an object at an opponent standing inside the field of play, the referee restarts play with an indirect free kick to the opposing team from the position of the ball when play was stopped (see Law 13 – Position of free kick)

Denying a goal or an obvious goalscoring opportunity

There are two sending-off offences that deal with denying an opponent an obvious opportunity to score a goal. It is not necessary for the offence to occur inside the penalty area.

If the referee applies advantage during an obvious goalscoring opportunity and a goal is scored directly, despite the opponent's handling the ball or fouling an opponent, the player cannot be sent off but he may still be cautioned.

Referees should consider the following circumstances when deciding whether to send off a player for denying a goal or an obvious goalscoring opportunity:

- the distance between the offence and the goal
- the likelihood of keeping or gaining control of the ball
- the direction of the play
- the location and number of defenders
- the offence which denies an opponent an obvious goalscoring opportunity may be an offence that incurs a direct free kick or an indirect free kick