

Simplified Rules of Soccer

For those families new to soccer, and those who still feel new regarding the rules, the following "Simplified Rules of Soccer" should be a handy guide through the many years of soccer enjoyment ahead. The information is drawn from publications of the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). In soccer, by-the-way, they are not called rules, but laws.

LAW #1 THE FIELD OF PLAY

The soccer field (commonly known as the "pitch") should always be rectangular with a maximum length of 130 yards and a minimum length of 100 yards. The width should be a maximum of 100 yards and a minimum of 50 yards. The field must be longer than it is wide. With the proportions correct, junior fields can be smaller depending on the age level. The longer boundary lines are called touch lines, and the shorter boundary lines are called goal lines. A goal is centered on each goal line.

LAW #2 THE BALL

The ball must be round with a circumference of 27"-28" for regulation adult play. The weight should be 14-16 oz. This is a "Size 5" ball. For medium sized children size 4 is often used (age 7-12). The circumference is 25"-26" and the weight is 12-14 oz. For very small children a size 3 ball is often used (ages 4-7). The circumference is 23"-25" and the weight is 10-12 oz.

LAW #3 NUMBER OF PLAYERS

In a regulation match, each side is composed of 11 players, with the number of subs to be no more than 3 for competitive matches, or the number agreed to for a "friendly" match. Younger youth levels often use fewer players (U-7, U-8 = 7 vs 7; U-9, U-10 = 8 vs 8). A player who has been replaced cannot come back into the match. The number of substitutions can be modified for youth play at U16 and below. The substitution part of the law is widely ignored in the U.S. anyway. A complete roster of players and subs must be presented to the referee before the game starts (player passes are sometimes used instead). The referee must be notified and must indicate his permission to enter before a substitution can step onto the pitch. Players must leave the field before the substitute can enter. Any player sent off (red carded) may not be replaced and the team must play short for the remainder of the match.

LAW #4 PLAYERS' EQUIPMENT

The usual uniform of the soccer player is a jersey, shorts, calf socks, shin guards and shoes. Nothing potentially injurious to another player may be worn. All jewelry is considered dangerous. Referees do not have any leeway on jewelry below the highest level of professional play. No jewelry should be allowed, period, in any youth or amateur play. Cleats are normally rubber, plastic, aluminum or leather. The goalkeeper must wear a different color than the other members of the team. Shin guards must give a reasonable degree of protection.

LAW #5 THE REFEREE

The referee is in charge of all game activity and is to make sure each team abides by the Laws of the Game. He is to stop, suspend, or terminate a match as appropriate. His decisions are final. It is the referee's responsibility to keep the game clock, and enforce proper game conduct by players, substitutes and team officials. He can send off players or others who commit an act of misconduct. His authority extends from the time he arrives in the area of the field to the time he leaves the area. Cards can only be shown to players and substitutes, and only during the match. Other cautions and send offs are done without showing a card, but count the same as if a card had been shown.

LAW #6 ASSISTANT REFEREES

There are usually two Assistant Referees (ARs), one for each touch line. Their main responsibility is to assist the referee by indicating ball out of bounds, offside, corner kicks, and goal kicks; and to assist in enforcing the laws by indicating fouls the referee cannot see. ARs assist the referee by indicating their opinion, but the decision is still the referee's, if he saw the event or incident. ARs do not have whistles and cannot stop play. When no registered referees are available for this function, club linesmen are used. The referee can only use club linesmen for out of bounds indications.

LAW #7 GAME DURATION

U8 games have four 10 minute quarters. U10 games have 25 minute halves, U12 games 30 minute halves, U14 games 35 minute halves, U16 games 40 minute halves, and all higher level games 45 minute halves. The referee is to add time for time wasting, injuries, substitutions, and any other cause.

LAW #8 START OF PLAY

To start play there is a kick off. This happens at the start of the game, halftime and after a goal has been scored. A player standing near the halfway line kicks the ball to a fellow player. Opposing players must stay outside the center circle until the ball has been kicked. After the ball is touched and moves forward the game is officially started. The kicker may not touch the ball again until it has been touched by another player.

LAW #9 BALL IN AND OUT PLAY

After the whole ball completely crosses the touch line or goal line, either on the ground or in the air, it is out of play. Any ball striking a referee, goal post, or corner post and remaining on the field is in play. The line itself is in bounds, and the ball is out of play (or a goal is scored) only when all of the ball is completely past the outer edge of the line. If any part of the ball is still touching any part of the line (extended from the ground up into the sky), it is still in play.

LAW #10 GOAL SCORING

A goal is scored when the whole ball completely crosses the goal line, between the goal posts and under the cross bar. The winner of the game is determined by the most goals scored.

LAW #11 OFFSIDE

A player is in an offside position if he is nearer to his opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second-to-last opponent (counting the keeper, if he is one of the two defenders closest to the goal line). A player is not offside when in his own half of the field of play. It is not an offense to be in an offside position. The referee is to call an offside infraction only if, in his judgement, the player in an offside position when the ball is played or touched by a teammate interferes with play, interferes with another player, or gains an advantage by being in that position. There is no offside offense if a player receives the ball directly from a goal kick, a throw-in or a corner kick. When offside is called, the defending team is awarded an indirect free kick from where the infringement occurred.

LAW #12 FOULS AND MISCONDUCT

Fouls can only be committed on the field of play (i.e. inside the boundary lines) and while the ball is in play. There are two categories of foul, penal and technical. Except for handling, penal fouls can only be committed against an opponent. Fouls are dealt with by awarding a free kick to the opposing team. Misconduct can be an included part of some fouls, or can be unrelated to a foul. Misconduct is dealt with by issuing a caution (yellow card) or sending the player off (red card).

A. For penal fouls, the referee awards a direct free kick to the other team from where the infraction occurred:

1. Kicking opponent
2. Tripping opponent
3. Jumping at opponent
4. Charging opponent
5. Striking opponent
6. Pushing opponent
7. Making contact with the opponent before the ball when tackling.
8. Holding opponent
9. Spitting at an opponent
10. Deliberately handling ball (deliberately touching ball with hands or arms from the shoulder on down)

The first six are to be called only if the referee considers that they were done carelessly, recklessly, or with excessive force. A penalty kick is awarded if any of these 10 penal fouls are committed in the offending team's own penalty area.

B. An indirect free kick shall be awarded when a player commits these technical fouls. The first three can only be committed against an opponent.

1. Dangerous play adversely affecting opponent's play
2. Preventing the opposing goalkeeper from releasing the ball
3. Impeding an opponent
4. A goalkeeper taking more than 6 seconds to release the ball while controlling it with his hands
5. Wasting time
6. A goalkeeper handling a ball that has been intentionally played with a teammate's foot, or thrown in by a teammate, or that he has controlled with the hands and returned to or allowed to fall to the ground.
7. Any offense not mentioned above for which play is stopped to caution or send off (yellow or red card).

C. Cautionable Offenses: A player is cautioned and shown the yellow card if he commits any of the following seven offenses:

1. Is guilty of unsporting behavior
2. Shows dissent by word or action
3. Persistently infringes the Laws of the Game
4. Delays the restart of play
5. Fails to respect the required distance when play is restarted with a kick off, corner kick or free kick
6. Enters or re-enters the field of play without the referee's permission
7. Deliberately leaves the field of play without the referee's permission

D. Sending-Off Offenses: A player is sent off and shown the red card if he commits any of the following seven offenses:

1. Is guilty of serious foul play
2. Is guilty of violent conduct
3. Spits at an opponent or any other person
4. Denies an opponent a goal or an obvious goal-scoring opportunity by deliberately handling the ball (this does not apply to a goalkeeper within his own penalty area)

5. Denies an obvious goal-scoring opportunity to an opponent moving towards the player's goal by an offense punishable by a free kick or a penalty kick

6. Uses offensive, insulting or abusive language or gestures

7. Receives a second caution (yellow card) in the same match

The referee is to refrain from calling fouls that are trifling or doubtful, or when stopping play for the foul would give an advantage to the offending team or take one away from the fouled team.

LAW #13 FREE KICKS

The types of free kick awarded by the referee are the:

A. Direct Free Kick - a goal can be scored by kicking the ball directly into the goal

B. Indirect Free Kick - the ball must touch another player before a goal can be scored; if the ball goes into the goal without being touched by another player, it is just out-of-bounds, and the defensive side gets a goal kick.

In either case, the kicker is free to simply pass the ball to a teammate. When a free kick is taken, the opposing team must stay at least 10 yards away from the ball until it is kicked. A team cannot score against itself directly (i.e. without another player besides the original kicker touching the ball) on any free kick. Any free kick taken from inside the kicker's own penalty area cannot be touched by any other player until it has passed outside the penalty area into the playing field. It is not in play until that happens. No opposing player can enter the penalty area until the ball has passed out of it.

LAW #14 PENALTY KICKS

A penalty kick is awarded after a penal foul (law #12, part A) takes place in the offending team's penalty area. It is a direct kick taken 12 yards from the goal line. All players except the goalie and kicker must stay outside of the penalty area, behind the penalty mark, and at least 10 yards from the ball until it is kicked. The goalie must stand on the goal line and may not move forward off of it until the ball is kicked.

LAW #15 THE THROW-IN

When the ball completely crosses the touch line, a throw-in is awarded to the opponents of the player who last touched the ball, from the point where the ball crossed the line. The ball must be thrown by both hands from behind and over the head. At the moment the thrower releases the ball:

A. The thrower must be facing the playing field.

B. Both feet must be outside or on the touch line. Any part of the foot touching the line makes it legal.

C. Both feet must be touching the ground.

On incorrect throws, a throw in is awarded to the opposite team. The thrower may not

touch the ball a second time until it has been touched by another player. It is not unusual in youth soccer for the throw to not enter the field, that is, the ball goes up the touch line and never breaks the plane of the outside edge of the line. This doesn't count as a throw at all. The thrower just picks it up and throws again. If the referee believes this is intentional and to waste time, he may caution the player and must add on time.

LAW #16 GOAL KICKS

A goal kick is awarded when the ball crosses the goal line but a goal is not scored, and it was last touched by an attacking player. The ball can be kicked from anywhere in the goal area. The ball must travel outside the penalty area into the field of play before it is in play. If it is touched before it leaves the penalty area, the kick is retaken. The attacking team must stay out of the penalty area until the ball is in play. Once the ball is in play, the kicker may not touch the ball a second time until it has been touched by another player.

LAW #17 CORNER KICKS

A corner kick is awarded when the ball crosses the goal line, but a goal is not scored, and it was last touched by a defensive player. One member of the attacking team takes the kick on the quarter circle nearest the corner flag post. The opposing team must remain at least 10 yards from the ball as it is kicked. A goal may be scored directly from this kick. The kicker may not touch the ball a second time until it has been touched by another player.

There are many other details the referee must know and apply in making decisions on the field. Knowing this simplified version of the "Laws of The Game" won't enable you to referee, but should make watching the games more enjoyable