



2026 NCAA Soccer Points of Emphasis

The NCAA has established national points of emphasis for men's and women's soccer, which are effective for the 2026 soccer season. In cooperation with the National Coordinator of Officials and the Secretary-Rules Editor, feedback was solicited from conference coordinators of officials in identifying topics deserving of special attention. The goal is to establish a more consistent application nationally as well as from conference to conference. There will be training videos on each point of emphasis published on RQ+ as we get closer to the start of the season.

On-Field Points of Emphasis:

1. **Video Review Procedures.** There have been significant changes to video review. Each team will have two (2) challenges per match. These can be used at any time for any of the situations that are challengeable. The majority of all reviews will now be initiated by a coach's challenge. These include:
 - Determining whether violent behavior occurred and identifying all participants;
 - Correctly identifying players for disciplinary matters;
 - Determining if a direct free kick foul committed by the defending team took place in the penalty area;
 - Determining if an offense punishable by a penalty kick has occurred;
 - Determining whether a straight red card (not a second caution) should have been issued (the referee can upgrade the call to a straight red card or downgrade it to a yellow card or a free kick);
 - Determining the proper punishment in cases of stopping a promising attack or denying an obvious goal scoring opportunity (the referee can examine the validity of the decision to call a foul or not and whether the play meets the criteria for denial of an obvious goal scoring opportunity or stopping a promising attack);
 - Determining whether a goal should have been disallowed for an offside offense. This includes plays where the call on the field resulted in an offside call or a goal being awarded (as long as the whistle was not blown before the ball entered the goal);
 - Determining whether the attacking team committed an offense, including offside, prior to or in the process of scoring a goal; and
 - Determining whether the attacking team committed an offense, including offside, prior to the award of a penalty kick or a red card for Denial of an Obvious Goal Scoring Opportunity.

The referee can only initiate a review without a coach's challenge in the following circumstances:

- To determine whether or not the ball has crossed the goal line for a goal;
- For timing errors; and
- For any other reviewable situation occurring in the final 10 minutes of regulation or at any point in overtime, **ONLY IF A TEAM HAS USED BOTH OF ITS CHALLENGES.**

Only the Head Coach is authorized to make the video challenge signal (twirling the index finger in a circular motion while pointing upward). In addition to making the signal, the coach should verbally inform the nearest official of their intention to challenge. Players and

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coaches other than the head coach who make gestures to the referee relating to a video review are at risk of being cautioned.

2. **Coaching and Team Area Decorum.** There are several rules changes this year that emphasize the accountability of the head coaches for the behavior of coaching and team area occupants.
 - The head coach should be the representative of their team in speaking to the officiating crew. Referees should have minimal tolerance for dissent and other misconduct committed by assistant coaches, substitutes, and other occupants of the team and coaching areas.
 - When misconduct is committed by an occupant of the coaching area or team area who cannot be clearly identified, then the head coach shall be issued the yellow card.
 - If substitutes run across the field or through or in front of the other team's coaching and team area in the celebration of a goal, the head coach shall be cautioned.
 - Any yellow cards given to assistant coaches and other non-player/non-substitutes who are on the roster are charged to the head coach at the conclusion of the game for accumulation purposes. If both the head coach and an assistant coach are cautioned during the game, the head coach will be charged with two (2) yellows for their season accumulation. Please note that this does not mean that the head coach is ejected if both they and an assistant are cautioned during the game.
3. **Taunting.** All participants are reminded that Rule 12.4.5 prohibits "Engaging in taunting or ridiculing another player, bench personnel, officials or spectators or excessive celebration". Participants are reminded to interact with opponents in a sporting way. Goal celebrations and other actions should not focus on opponents or their fans. Officials are expected to issue yellow cards when these standards are not met.
4. **Persistent Infringement of the Rules.** Referees are expected to caution players who repeatedly violate the rules. Persistent infringement includes:
 - Multiple fouls or infractions committed by the same player; and
 - A pattern of fouls committed by multiple players on a team against a specific opponent.
5. **Enforcement of the Eight (8) Second Rule for Goalkeepers.** The first three (3) seconds of the countdown are done silently. Goalkeepers should be given a moment to collect themselves and start the process of rising to their feet after making a diving save before the referee begins the count. When goalkeepers delay rising to their feet, the referee should inform them that the count has begun. The last five (5) seconds should be counted down visually and verbally. The referee should fully extend the arm above the head and show the number of seconds remaining with each extension of the arm. It is important that this verbal and visual count be an accurate five (5) seconds that matches the game clock. If the count reaches zero and the goalkeeper is still holding the ball, a corner kick is awarded. No yellow card should be issued here; the corner kick is the punishment.

Referees must be alert to any attempts by the attackers to slow down or prevent the goalkeeper's attempt to release the ball. In such cases, officials have two options:

- Pause the count until the attacker stops interfering. This is only a pause, not a reset of the count. Officials should verbally announce that the count has been paused; or
- Award an indirect free kick.

6. Grappling in the Penalty Area Prior to Restarts. Referees must be aware of team tactics to prevent or create scoring opportunities off of restarts. This applies to long throw-ins, corner kicks, and free kicks. Please be aware of the following:

- Crowding the goalkeeper and unfairly restricting their movement;
- Setting picks on defenders to free-up attackers;
- Defenders wrapping their arms around attackers to prevent them from getting to the ball; and
- Attackers pushing off defenders to get open.

Officials must be prepared for these tactics and use a combination of good positioning, player management, and situational awareness to make sure that neither team gains an unfair advantage.

The final two items are administrative in nature and are presented here for awareness to all stakeholders.

1. Video Review Availability. Please refer to 2024 Interpretations Volume 4 published on October 10, 2024, and available in full [here](#). The basic concepts are:

- a. Conferences retain the authority to mandate or prohibit the use of video review in their matches
- b. If the platform being used for video review is a non-publicly available feed (i.e., DVSPORT, Spideo, Veo, or [Vogo](#), etc.), both teams should have access to the same video that the referee will use to make decisions.
- c. If the game is being streamed or broadcast on television and that feed is different from what is normally used for video review, the host institution should make every effort to provide the broadcast video feed to the referee in addition to the normal video review platform. Teams are responsible for securing their own access to the broadcast feed or livestream of the match unless the broadcast/streamed video is a pay-per-view platform with a specific conference or institution, in which case the host institution should provide free access to the stream for visiting team for the duration of the match.
- d. Both head coaches and the referee shall meet at least 45 minutes prior to the match to confirm the video review that is in place for the day and ensure both teams have access to all video that will be utilized by the referee. The referee has sole authority to confirm that both head coaches have access to all video that will be utilized and to confirm the video being used is available. If the referee is not satisfied that both teams have equal access, video review should be limited to what is available to both teams.

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- e. The referee may use a device such as a laptop or a tablet from one of the teams to conduct the review, but the actual review must take place in a neutral location outside either team's coaching area.
2. **Violent Behavior I, Violent Behavior II, Fighting and Referee Assault Red Cards.** The referee will no longer make this judgment. The referee's responsibilities are to issue the red card on the field and submit the ejection report. To reduce the pressure on referees and ensure greater consistency, a disciplinary committee led by the NCAA Soccer Secretary-Rules Editor and the National Coordinator of Officials will review the NCAA Soccer Ejection Reports and related video to determine whether a Red Card will be classified as Violent Behavior I, Violent Behavior II, Fighting or Referee Assault. The decision of the disciplinary committee is final and cannot be protested. Governing Sports Authorities and institutions retain the ability to impose additional discipline beyond what is outlined in the NCAA Soccer Rules Book as deemed appropriate

This update includes issues addressed up to August 28, 2025. Additional video examples can be found on the NCAA Soccer Center Circle Central Hub on RQ+ in the 2025 NCAA Soccer Rules Questions and Interpretations Volume 1 document.

1. **IFAB Changes.** The NCAA Men's and Women's Soccer Rules Committee (Currently the NCAA Division I Men's Soccer Rules Subcommittee, Division I Women's Soccer Rules Subcommittee and Divisions II and III Men's and Women's Soccer Rules Committee) has adopted the IFAB changes to DOGSO handling and penalty kick encroachment for the current season. Detailed guidance for these changes can be found [here](#). Please note that the new eight second rule adopted by IFAB **is not** approved for use in NCAA soccer. Even the professional leagues in the United States that are currently playing will not adopt this change until next season. Officials should continue to enforce the six second rule (12.3.1.1) as they have done in the past. Officials are encouraged to be proactive and, where possible, warn before penalizing under 12.3.1.1.
2. **Players Deliberately Leaving the Field.** Players are permitted to leave the field briefly without asking permission during the course of play provided they return in a timely manner. Examples include an attacker who steps off the end line to avoid being called offside, a player who runs beyond a boundary line after dribbling or passing the ball past an opponent, or a player who has fallen to the ground. Players are not permitted to deliberately leave the field in order to deceive an opponent and gain an unfair advantage.
3. **Fitness/Strength and Conditioning Coaches.** Rule 1.12.3 requires coaches, players and bench personnel to remain inside their coaching and team areas with exceptions for players who are warming up in preparation for subbing into the game. Coaches may be with the players outside the team area to assist in stretching and physical preparation. While outside the coaching area, these coaches must refrain from coaching the players who are in the game or from engaging in comments to the officials or the opposing team.
4. **Errors on Ejection Reports.** Officials must make sure they select the proper team when

submitting ejection reports. Ejections have incorrectly been attributed to institutions who were not involved in the game. In addition, officials must make sure that the institution selected matches the write up in the narrative. For example, the dropdown menu shows the ejection as a player from school A, when the narrative lists the player from school B. Ejection reports automatically generate emails to coaches, athletics department administrators and conference office personnel, so it is imperative that the reports are done accurately.

5. **Violent Behavior I vs. Violent Behavior II.** The ruling on protest #1 for this season has generated some debate. Rule 12.7.10.2 states, “Violent behavior II is an unwarranted excessive act or use of force, which is malicious and so extreme and severe that it places a participant in danger of physical injury. These acts may include, but are not limited to, head butting, elbow to the face or head, stomping, kicking a defenseless person, hair pulling, spitting at, coughing at/on or biting an opponent or any other person.” With the exception of spitting, coughing at or biting, which are always Violent Behavior II by rule, the other acts mentioned as examples are not automatically Violent Behavior II. The Violent Behavior II designation is reserved for actions that premeditated and put the opponent at a significant risk of injury.
6. **Video Review.** Video Review is a valuable tool to assist in game control. Early in the season, some trends that need to be addressed have become apparent.
 - a. **Overreliance on Video Review.** The intent of video review is to prevent major errors. It is not to re-referee the game. The emphasis must be on getting the decision on the field correct prior to going to review. If a decision is obvious, going to review in order to placate the coaches unnecessarily delays the game and opens up the possibility for further dissent.
 - b. **Pregame Communication with Coaches.** Officials must be cognizant that not all games will have video review. Early in the season, especially in non-conference games, officials should inform both coaches whether or not video review will be used for the game. There is no requirement that the coaches agree, as Rule 5.7.1 requires the use of video review if the equipment is available. However, it is considered a best practice to make sure that all parties are aware that video review is being used.