



COLLEGE FOOTBALL OFFICIATING, LLC

INTENTIONAL GROUNDING GUIDELINES AND MECHANICS

Thanks to several conference coordinators for developing this material. Terry McAulay (Big East) took the lead in crafting the document, with input from Don Lucas (Sun Belt), Ken Rivera (Mountain West) and Steve Shaw (Southeastern).

Guidelines

In 2011, the rule for intentional grounding (Rule 7-3-2-f and -h) has been changed. There is still a foul for intentional grounding if no eligible Team A player is in the vicinity of the pass, but the foul no longer carries the requirement that the receiver have a reasonable opportunity to catch the pass. This clearly eases the restrictions on the passer. However, under either definition, it has always been difficult to provide absolute guidelines that will allow for consistent application of the rule. The purpose of this document is to provide reasonable guidelines as to what constitutes "in the vicinity." It will also provide standard mechanics to be used in making this complex ruling.

Note 1: In all cases except when the ball is thrown directly into the ground, there is no foul unless there is pressure on the passer. This is implicit in all guidelines below.

Note 2: These guidelines only deal with the question of an eligible receiver in the area of the pass. The rules regarding a passer who has left the tackle box and throws the ball to or beyond the line of scrimmage are clear and well understood.

Note 3: In all cases, the term "eligible receiver" means "Team A eligible receiver."

These guidelines will address the primary types of plays in which intentional grounding fouls may occur. The passer is under pressure and:

- dumps the ball into an area with no eligible receiver.
- grounds the ball on a broken screen pass.
- throws the ball well over the head of an eligible receiver.

1. There is not, nor will there ever be, an exact yardage distance between the receiver and where the pass lands that will absolutely determine whether a foul has been committed. That distance can vary significantly based on the circumstances of the play and the **direction of the pass**. This phrase "**direction of the pass**" is emphasized as it provides the crucial piece of evidence that allows us to determine the "intentional" aspect of the play. For example, the quarterback in the pocket throws the ball toward eligible receiver A88 who is five yards downfield, but the pass lands seven yards short directly in front of A88. This would not be a foul. However, if the pass is thrown away from A88 and lands seven yards to his left as A88 crosses to the right, this would indeed be a foul. Note: seven yards is used simply as an example---it is not intended to be "**the** yardage guideline." In making this determination, officials are to use "direction of the pass" to judge how far away from an eligible receiver the ball must be before calling a foul. We should stretch this distance as much as reasonably possible based on the direction of the pass. For a foul to be called it should be clear to everyone that the passer throws the ball into an area not occupied by an eligible receiver. Do not be overly technical.

2. An underlying reason for the change this year is to allow coaches to teach their quarterbacks how to dump the football legally and end the play. This happens most often on broken screen passes. We've all seen a running back who is the intended receiver on a screen get knocked down or otherwise held up (legally or illegally). The play breaks down quickly and the quarterback has to get rid of the football. We know that the quarterback under pressure cannot spike the ball straight to the ground (unless the running back was knocked down right at his feet!), so we ask him to get "air under the ball" **toward** an eligible teammate to legally end the play. Again, while we use the direction of the pass more than the distance to the receiver, we certainly must understand that there is a limit to that distance. If the pass goes directly to the ground with no eligible receiver very close to that spot, this is a foul. Otherwise, if there is "air under the ball" toward an eligible receiver, then there is no foul unless the ball lands significantly far from an eligible receiver.

3. What about the pass thrown over the head of the receiver? How high can it legally be? How far away may it land and still be legal? Again, there can be no definitive measurement, but here is the guideline: if the ball is thrown out of bounds at the sideline and directly over a receiver who is near the numbers or beyond, there should be no flag unless the ball is thrown so high that no one could ever question the foul. If the player is between the numbers and the hash mark, then we will become increasingly restrictive the closer his position is toward the hash marks. Similarly, a pass thrown beyond the end line over an eligible receiver also would also not be a foul unless it is thrown at such a height that it is unquestionably a foul. If a pass is thrown in the field of play over a receiver's head, then there would only be a foul if it lands **significantly** beyond that receiver.

Another play that raises concerns is the pass intended for a player who supposedly runs the wrong route. Since officials are not privy to the offensive schemes this should not be a consideration. Certainly if a player makes his cut after the pass is thrown and, because of his speed and direction, the ball lands well away

from him, there is no foul. However, if he makes his cut prior to the pass, then there would be a foul for intentional grounding, and "the receiver ran the wrong route" would be no excuse.

Often in making the decision about possible intentional grounding the referee must judge whether contact with the passer materially affects the pass. The question to consider is this: When does the contact occur in relation to the passing motion? If it occurs at the start of or during the passing motion, in most cases the passer will not be charged with intentional grounding. There is the slight possibility that the errant pass was clearly intentional and a foul could occur, but this would be a rare and unusual situation. If the passing motion begins after the contact, then the passer must get the ball to the area of an eligible receiver, or at least to the line of scrimmage if he has left the tackle box.

In summary, there are many variables in determining intentional grounding, and thus it is one of the most difficult calls to make consistently. These guidelines are not intended to provide absolute conditions for judging whether or not there is a foul. However, officials should be absolutely certain that these guidelines have been met or exceeded before calling a foul. **When in question, there is no foul for intentional grounding.**

Mechanics

While judging whether intentional grounding has occurred is difficult, the mechanics for making this determination are equally demanding. The mechanics for ruling intentional grounding have evolved significantly over the past few years. Initially, the burden was placed entirely on the referee to determine: pressure, location of the passer, effect of contact on the passer, and if there was a receiver in the vicinity or whether the pass reached the line of scrimmage. All of this had to be determined **AND** the referee still had to rule on the possibility of roughing the passer. We know that there is no possibility of getting assistance from another official on fouls committed against the passer, so it is absolutely mandatory that the referee stay with the quarterback until there is no longer a threat for a foul against him. This makes it extremely difficult if not impossible in most cases for the referee to determine where the pass ends up and to make an accurate judgment on whether there is intentional grounding.

For this reason, primary responsibility has shifted to the official or officials covering the pass for determining whether an eligible receiver is in the vicinity, or, in the case of the quarterback who has left tackle box, whether the pass reaches the line of scrimmage. The referee still must determine location of the passer, pressure, and contact that may affect the pass. But since he must stay with the quarterback, he must get assistance with where the pass ends.

When the play is over, if no foul has occurred, the covering official(s) will inform the referee that an eligible receiver is in the area by pointing toward that receiver, or, if the quarterback has left the tackle box, signaling that the pass reached the line of scrimmage. If there is potential for a foul because either there is no eligible receiver in the vicinity or the pass did not reach the line of scrimmage, the covering official(s) will immediately move to the referee to give him that information. The type of communication (verbal, physical signals, etc.) may vary

based on the specific play. The referee will then make the final determination based on his knowledge of pressure, location, and contact with regard to the passer. If all conditions for a foul are met, the referee will then throw a late flag into the approximate area where the pass was thrown. He may get assistance from the covering official in determining that spot after the flag is thrown. If those requirements are not met, the referee may make an announcement as to the reason no foul was committed.

Occasionally there are situations when the referee is able to make this judgment on his own--the ball spiked, a pass deliberately thrown directly toward the sideline where no eligible receiver could possibly be, etc.--and he may throw a flag without assistance. However, these situations are the exception. Almost always there will be a multi-official process to determine that a foul has occurred.

Summary

Intentional grounding is one of the most difficult fouls to call consistently. It is one of the few fouls that almost always require the involvement of two or more officials in determining whether a foul has been committed. The penalty can be quite severe and can sometimes result in a score. Thus, there must be no doubt that a foul has occurred before a flag is thrown; but if an obvious foul is committed, it must be called so that the defense is not unjustly put at a disadvantage after making a good play.

Examples

1. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball in the flat and it lands at the A-45. The nearest receiver is in the middle of the field at the A-45. **Ruling:** Foul for intentional grounding.
2. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball down the middle of the field and it lands several yards in front of covered receiver A86. **Ruling:** Legal play.
3. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball well out of the end zone through the uprights. Receiver A88 was 5 yards deep in the end zone and in the middle of the field. **Ruling:** Legal play.
4. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball well out of the end zone through the uprights. The nearest receiver was in the end zone and nine yards from the sideline. **Ruling:** Foul for intentional grounding.
5. On an attempted screen play, QB A1 fakes a handoff to tailback A22 who is then tackled. Under pressure, A1 throws the ball to the ground just behind A22 who is lying on the ground. **Ruling:** Legal play.
6. On an attempted screen play, QB A1 fakes a handoff to tailback A22 who is then tackled. Under pressure, A1 throws the ball to the ground several yards to the right of A22 who is lying on the ground. **Ruling:** Foul for intentional grounding.
7. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball at the feet of blocking back A22. **Ruling:** Legal play.

8. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball several yards to the left of blocking back A22. **Ruling:** Foul for intentional grounding.
9. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball out of bounds at the sideline and well over the head of eligible receiver A24 who is at the top of the numbers. **Ruling:** Legal play.
10. QB A1 drops back in the pocket and cannot find an open receiver. Under pressure he throws the ball out of bounds at the sideline and well over the head of eligible receiver A24 who is halfway between the numbers and the hash. **Ruling:** Foul for intentional grounding.
11. On a broken screen, RB A22 is covered and just behind the line of scrimmage. QB A1, under pressure, throws the ball directly to the ground. **Ruling:** Foul for intentional grounding.
12. On a broken screen, RB A22 is covered and just behind the line of scrimmage. QB A1, under pressure and deep in the pocket, throws the ball which lands four yards directly behind A22 . **Ruling:** Legal play.