

What is an Official?

An official is a person who has the responsibility for enforcing the rules and maintaining the order of the game. They are traditionally clad in a black-and-white striped shirt, white pants with a black belt, and black shoes. During professional and college football, seven officials and sometimes six operate on the field. High school and other levels of football have other officiating systems ranging from two man to five man crews. Football officials are commonly referred to as **referees**, but each has a title based on their position. They consist of: Referee, Head Linesman, Line Judge, Umpire, Back Judge, Side Judge, and Field Judge. Because the referee is responsible for the general supervision of the game, the position is sometimes referred to as **head referee** to distinguish it from the other "referees".

Positions and Basic Responsibilities:

Referee

A **referee** (R) is responsible for the general supervision of the game and has the final authority on all rulings. Thus, this position is sometimes referred to as **head referee**, "**white Hat**", **Crew Chief**. He can be identified by his white cap, while the other officials wear black ones.

During each play from scrimmage he positions himself behind the offensive team, favoring the right side (if the quarterback is a right-handed passer). On passing plays, he primarily focuses on the quarterback and defenders approaching him. The referee rules on possible roughing the passer and, if the quarterback loses the ball, determines whether it is a fumble or an incomplete pass.

On running plays, the referee observes the quarterback during and after he hands off the ball to the running back, remaining with him until the action has cleared just in case it is really a play action pass or some other trick passing play. Afterwards, the Referee then checks the running back and the contact behind him.

During punts and field goals, the referee observes the kicker (and holder) and any contact made by defenders approaching them. In College football, the NFL and other professional leagues, and in some high school games, the referee announces penalties and the numbers of the players committing them (college and professional), and clarifies complex and/or unusual rulings over a wireless microphone to both fans and the media, including the result of instant replay reviews. In addition to the general equipment listed above, the referee also carries a coin in order to conduct the pre-game coin toss.

Umpire

The **umpire** (U) stands behind the defensive line and linebackers, observing the blocks by the offensive line and defenders trying to ward off those blocks looking for holding or illegal blocks. During passing plays, he moves forward towards the line of scrimmage as the play develops in order to (1) penalize any offensive linemen who move illegally downfield before the pass is thrown or (2) penalize the quarterback for throwing the ball when beyond the original line of scrimmage. He also assists on ruling incomplete passes when the ball is thrown short.

Head Linesman and Line Judge (Wings)

The **head linesman** (H or HL) stands at one end of the line of scrimmage (usually the side opposite the press box), looking for possible off-sides, encroachment and other penalties before the snap. As the play develops, he is responsible for judging the action near his sideline, including whether a player is out of bounds. During the start of passing plays, he is responsible to watch the receivers near his sideline to a point 5-7 yards beyond the line of scrimmage.

He marks the point of progress, line of scrimmage. The **line judge** (L or LJ) assists the head linesman at the other end of the line of scrimmage, looking for possible off-sides, encroachment and other penalties before the snap. As the play develops, he is responsible for the action near his sideline, including whether a player is out of bounds.

During the start of passing plays, he is responsible to watch the receivers near his sideline to a point 5-7 yards beyond the line of scrimmage. Afterwards, he moves back towards the line of scrimmage, ruling if a pass is forward, a lateral, or if it is illegally thrown beyond the line of scrimmage. On punts and field goal attempts, the line judge also determines whether the kick is made from behind the line of scrimmage.

In high school (four-man crews) and minor leagues, the line judge is the official timekeeper, receivers and defenders. He rules on pass interference, illegal blocks downfield, and incomplete passes.

With the one of the deep officials, they rule whether point after tries (PAT) or field goal attempts are successful. They both signal together when the try is good by raising their arms straight in the air at the same time, like a touchdown. If the attempt is no good to one side or the other the covering official signals that the try was wide or short on that side and a signal, like an incomplete pass is given.

Side Judge and Field Judge

The **side judge** (S or SJ) works downfield behind the defensive secondary on the same sideline as the head linesman. Like the field judge, he makes decisions near the sideline on his side of field, judging the action of nearby running backs, receivers and defenders. He rules on pass interference, illegal blocks downfield, and incomplete passes. During field goal attempts he serves as a second umpire.

In college football, the side judge is responsible for either the game clock or the play clock, which are operated by an assistant under his direction. With the field judge, he rules whether field goal attempts are successful.

If the official time is kept on the stadium scoreboard clock, the **Field Judge** becomes the backup timekeeper. In college football, the Field judge is responsible for either the game clock or the play clock, which are operated by an assistant under his direction. In high school (five-man crews), the back judge is the official timekeeper of the game. The back judge is also the keeper of the play clock in high school games, and times the one minute allowed for time outs. The Field Judge is responsible for marking the end of the punt (kick) with his bean bag. This signifies the end of the kick and the spot of change of possession.

Other officiating systems:

Arena football, high school football, and other levels of football have other officiating systems.

- A *three-official system* uses only the referee, head linesman, and line judge, or in some cases, referee, umpire and head linesman. It is common in junior high and youth football.

- A *four-official system* uses the referee, the umpire, the head linesman, and the line judge. It is primary used at lower levels of football, including junior varsity and some high school varsity.

- A *five-official system* is used in arena football and most high school varsity football. It adds the back judge to the four-official system.

- A *six-official system* uses the seven-official system without the back judge. It is used in some high school and small-college games.

Football officials generally use the following equipment:

- Whistle** - Used to signal the end of a play.

- Penalty Flag** - A bright yellow colored flag that is thrown on the field toward or at the spot of a foul. It is wrapped around a weight, such as sand or beans, so it can be thrown with some distance and accuracy. Most veteran officials will carry a second flag in case there are multiple penalties on a play.

·**Bean Bag** - Used to mark various spots that are not penalties. For example, it is used to mark the spot of a fumble or where a player caught a punt. It's either colored white or blue, depending on the official's league, college conference, or level of play.

·**Down Indicator** - A specially designed wristband that is used to remind officials of the current down. It has an elastic loop attached to it that is wrapped around the fingers. Usually, officials put the loop around their index finger when it is first down, the middle finger when it is second down, and so on. Some officials, generally the Umpire position, may also use an indicator to keep track of where the ball was placed between the hash marks before the play (i.e. the right hash marks, the left ones, or at the midpoint between the two). This is important when they re-spot the ball after an incomplete pass. Some officials use two thick rubber bands tied together as a down indicator. One rubber band is used as the wristband and the other is looped over the fingers.

·**Game Data Card and Pencil** - Officials write down important administrative information, such as the winner of the pre-game coin toss, team timeouts, and fouls called. Game data cards can be disposable paper or reusable plastic. A pencil with a special bullet-shaped cap is often carried. The cap prevents the official from being stabbed by the pencil while it is in his pocket.

·**Hat** - If a player not carrying the ball steps out of bounds (a wide receiver running a deep passing route or a player running downfield on punt coverage; for example), the official will drop his hat to mark the spot of where the player went out of bounds. The hat also is often used: to signal a second foul called by the official on a play (by those officials that may carry only one flag); to indicate unsportsmanlike conduct committed against the official himself (as when a player shoves an official); or when some other situation requires a physical mark and the official has already used the ordinary item on the play.

·**Stopwatch**- Officials will carry a stopwatch (typically a digital wristwatch) when necessary for timing duties, including keeping game time, keeping the play clock, and timing timeouts and the interval between quarters.