



COLLEGE FOOTBALL OFFICIATING, LLC

“FOUL” AND “PENALTY”: THEY ARE NOT THE SAME

Quite often football officials use the words “foul” and “penalty” interchangeably, as if they were identical. Announcers, analysts, coaches, fans and others do the same thing. We call our yellow marker a “penalty flag.” We will often remark “there was a penalty on that play” when we really mean there was a foul. I often hear officials say “that foul was declined,” and referees occasionally announce “those penalties offset.” And both are inaccurate.

A *foul* and a *penalty* are in fact *not the same thing*. They are related, of course, but they are certainly different, and the loose talk we sometimes use in mixing the two can lead to sloppy thinking. A foul by definition (Rule 2-10-1) is a rule infraction for which a penalty is prescribed. A penalty (Rule 2-20) is the result imposed against a team as the consequence of committing a foul. The foul is the action of the game, and the penalty is the price paid for that action.

One helpful way of thinking about this is that the foul is the “crime” and the penalty is the “punishment.” So if armed robbery were the “foul” then serving time in prison would be the “penalty.” It is interesting that we never confuse these in the real world. No one would claim that the prison term is the crime and armed robbery the punishment. But in football we mix these up routinely.

How are foul and penalty related? It turns out that they are connected the same in football as in the real world. In football there is no penalty unless there is a foul, but it is certainly possible to have a foul and no penalty. In the real world there is no prison term absent the crime, but there might be a crime with no punishment (the perpetrator might get off on a technicality, for example).

In football, how can we have a foul but no penalty? A foul by the opponent offsets the foul in question, so there is no penalty. And a penalty can be declined, either by the offended team or by rule. The foul has happened; it can’t be taken back, and it surely can’t be accepted or declined. But whether or not there is a penalty depends on other things.

Here’s an example of why confusing *foul* and *penalty* can lead to a serious misunderstanding of the rules. An official once sent me this play: Team A has the ball at its own 20. Team B is in the neutral zone at the snap. The ball carrier runs for a

touchdown but during the run A66 clips at the B-5. His question to me was this: “Since the rules say that any foul may be declined (my ears perked up at that!) why can’t Team A decline the offside foul and keep the football at the B-20 after the clipping foul is enforced?” I wrote back to say, first, that is not what the rule says. Rule 10-1-1-b tells us that any *penalty* may be declined. And second, there is no penalty on this play because by rule the offside foul and the clipping foul offset (Rule 10-1-4), so there is no recourse for Team A.

Another illustration of this confusion arose when in 2011 the 10-second runoff option was created for fouls that cause the clock to stop in the last minute of a half. A former official, normally an excellent student of the rules, wrote to me asking, “What does it mean to say ‘a foul that causes the clock to stop’? The clock stops on every foul.” Again, he was confusing foul with penalty. A false start causes the clock to stop. But an illegal formation foul does not; it is true that the clock is stopped at the end of the down, but that is not because of the *foul*. We stop the clock to administer the *penalty*.

The new rule in 2013 that requires automatic disqualification as a part of the penalty for targeting fouls (Rules 9-1-3 and 9-1-4) provides an important reason for a clear understanding between foul and penalty. The targeting *fouls* have remained substantially unchanged since they were introduced in 2008. In 2013 it is the *penalty* that is stronger—automatic disqualification. Put another way, the crime is the same as before, but the punishment phase is new.

The examples illustrate that making the proper distinction between a *foul* and a *penalty* is not just a matter of being academically picky. It is necessary for a clear understanding of the rules of the game.

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