



Special Olympics North America

2024 Flag Football Rules Changes & Explanations

Rules Modifications: This section is for revised/new language that alters the application, interpretation or enforcement of an existing rule or introduces a new rule. Emphasis rules highlighted in **GREEN**.

1. Uniform requirements (II.B.1, II.B.1.b.i)

- a. New language: All participants must have shirts that are uniform or comparable in color and style
 - i. Reasoning: Restricting matching uniform to only shirts and not pants/shorts will allow for players greater freedom to find pants/shorts that meet the no pockets requirement
- b. New language: Shorts/pants shall be of contrasting color to flags
 - i. Reasoning: Having shorts/pants that are a different color to the flags promotes visibility for opponents to pull flags and for officials to clearly judge the play

2. Timeouts (V.B.1, V.B.1.a)

- a. Revised language: **Each team receives two (2) 60-second time-out per game.**
- b. Deleted language: An unused time-out from the first half does not carry over to the second half
 - i. Reasoning: Allows for teams to conserve timeouts for the time of game when timeouts are most needed

3. Ball carrier hand allowed to touch ground (VIII.B.1.d, VIII.B.1.d.i)

- a. Revised language: **Any part of the ball carrier's body other than the feet or hands touches the ground.**
- b. New language: When in player possession, the ball is considered an extension of the hand.
 - i. Reasoning: Creates additional body parts hitting the ground making the play dead. Allows for a ball carrier to catch their balance with a hand. This brings Special Olympics rules into consistency with all other flag football rules (IFAF, USAF, AFFL, NFLF, NIRSA). Will be reviewing with American Specialty to confirm there are no added safety concerns with this rule change.
 - ii. American Specialty: No concerns from an added liability concern, from a risk management perspective there is enough research and evidence to back the rules change. Deferring to Special Olympics team on roll-out strategy.
 - iii. Checked with partnering organizations – USAF, NFL Flag, NIRSA, and they did not present any concerns or challenges to safety or competitive advantage in their current flag football formats of allowing interceptions to be returned for positive yards

4. Interceptions being able to be returned for positive yards; **Defenders will need to wear flag belts** (II.A.3, X.A.6)

- a. New language: **Interceptions may be returned for positive yards by the intercepting player.**
 - i. Reasoning: SRT has received Program, coach, and athlete feedback to allow for interceptions to be returned for yardage. This brings Special Olympics rules into consistency with all other flag football rules (IFAF, USAF, AFFL, NFLF, NIRSA).
 - ii. American Specialty: No concerns from an added liability concern, from a risk management perspective there is enough research and evidence to back the rules change – history of SOTN allowing interception returns, 7 main rulebooks from 5 other organizations allowing for interception returns, does not fundamentally change the risk or contact in the sport. Deferring to Special Olympics team on roll-out strategy.
 - iii. Checked with partnering organizations – USAF, NFL Flag, NIRSA, and they did not present any concerns or challenges to safety or competitive advantage in their current flag football formats of allowing interceptions to be returned for positive yards

5. Defensive rusher allowed to return to 7 yard line after snap for legal rush (XI.A.2)
 - a. New language: **If a rusher crosses the rush line early (within 7-yards from the line of scrimmage at snap), they may return to the rush line, reset, and then legally rush the quarterback.**
 - i. Reasoning: Provides defensive player an opportunity to still rush the quarterback even if they jumped across the rush line on a hard count. SRT felt it was important to protect the rushing player in this type of play. Language matches USAF.
6. Adding Delay of Game to defensive penalty chart (XVI)
 - a. New language: Disconcerting signals or other illegal action that causes delay
 - i. Reasoning: Defense can delay the game and should be penalized accordingly

Deletions: This section is for language that has been taken out of the rule book. The SRT deemed this language as no longer relevant or necessary in defining the gameplay of flag football.

1. Player equipment – defensive flag belts (II.A.3.a)
 - a. **Deleted language: Defensive players are not required to wear a flag belt.**
 - i. Reasoning: Since interceptions can be returned for positive yards, defenders should be expected to wear flag belts
2. Shovel pass (III)
 - a. Deleted language: A legal pass received beyond the line of scrimmage by throwing the ball underhand or pushing it towards a receiver in a shot put manner.
 - i. Reasoning: This type of pass is covered in forward pass definition
3. Time-outs (IV.B.1.a)
 - a. Deleted language: An unused time-out from the first half does not carry over to the second half
 - i. Reasoning: With time-out rule being two (2) per game, there is no need to define carry-over

Recommended changes for next rules update: This section includes rule changes that SRT supports, but not in these rules update cycle

1. Roster maximum (I.B.2.a, I.B.2.b)
 - a. Increasing roster maximum to twelve (12) players
 - i. Reasoning: Increasing roster maximum by two (2) additional players would help in tournaments that take place over a couple of days when illness/injury could occur. Larger roster sizes also allows for flexibility of lineup and position specialization
 - ii. SRT recommends waiting to implement this rules change until after 2026 USA Games. Based on information from SONA Sports team, 2026 USA Games is keeping the roster maximum at 10 players. SRT believes the SONA rules should remain consistent with USA Games procedures in order to help advancing teams best prepare for USA Games.

Discussed but left unchanged: This section is for rules that the SRT discussed as potential changes, but it was determined it was best to leave the rule as is

1. Mercy rule (VI.D)
 - a. Proposed change: Mercy rule modified to game ending in final minute, one team up 25+
 - i. Reason to deny: Many tournaments/competitions rely on point differential for tie-breakers and seeding purposes. SRT determined not to change the mercy rules to not compromise this

2. Equipment – Flag belt (11.A.3)

- a. Proposed change: Allowing a flag belt alternative (allowing for pop-socket)
 - i. Reason to deny: SRT determined that the current flag belt in the rules is the best for competitive flag football play and would be used for USA Games. SRT did not want to list an alternative option in the rules to avoid teams equipped with flag belts not approved by tournament, competition administration. Alternatives and modifications should be determined by tournament/competition administration

Clarifications: This section is for language revisions where the rule remains unchanged. The SRT believes the revised language will result in greater clarity and consistency of application, interpretation and enforcement of a rule.

1. New photo and made date of update more prevalent on cover (Cover)

2. Forward progress (I.E.6)

- a. Revised language: *Forward progress is marked at the forward point of the ball*, not the player, when the ball becomes dead by rule (ball carrier's flag belt is pulled or hand/knee touches ground, whistle sounds, etc.)

3. Uniform tops (II.B.1.a)

- a. Revised language: Shirts must *be numbered on* front and back and able to be tucked in at the waist to avoid obstruction of flag pulling.

4. Downs (III)

- a. Revised language: *Attempts by the offense to advance the ball. The offense has four (4) downs to cross mid-field. Once the offense crosses mid-field, they have four (4) additional downs to score a touchdown.*

5. Forward Pass (III)

- a. Revised language: A pass thrown, *either over- or underhanded*, with its initial direction towards the goal line where the offense is trying to score
 - i. Reasoning: Defining that a forward pass can be underhanded as well allowed the SRT to recommend deleting the shovel pass definition

6. Fumble (III, VIII.B.2.k)

- a. Revised language: A loss of player possession other than by handoff or pass (*dead when ball contacts ground*)
- b. Revised language: *A fumbled ball hits the ground.*

7. No run zone (IV.B.1)

- a. Revised language: When the line of scrimmage *is on or* in the no run zone, teams cannot run the ball.

8. Flag Guarding (XIII.F.2)

- a. Revised language: ***Contact must occur for a flag guarding penalty to be called.***

9. Penalties (XVI)

- a. Revised language: Added “Simultaneous with Snap” with Pre-Snap penalties for offense and defense

These rules modifications, deletions, and clarifications for the Special Olympics North America Flag Football Rules 2024 update were recommended by the SONA Flag Football Sport Resource Team (SRT). The SRT consists of the following members: Sean Stake, Craig Pippert (SONA Sports); Stephanie McKeon, Scott George, Lexxi O'Brien (SONA UCS); David Breen (SOIN); Chaka Sutton (SOCO); Amanda Alpert (Ole Miss); Brooke Turner (U. Alabama); Paden Alie (Purdue/NIRSA). Rules were compared to flag football rules of the following organizations' rule books – NIRSA, USA Football, NFL Flag, American Flag Football, and International Federation of American Football. The recommendations were reviewed by the following groups within Special Olympics – Athlete Input Council, SONA United States Leadership Council, and the SONA Flag Football Affinity Group.