



Football Officials and Their Duties

From James Alder,
Football officials... the men on the field
we all love to hate and complain about.
But without these keepers of the rules, a
football game could not progress with
any sort of structure or sanity.

Officials play a very important role in the
game, from keeping the game rolling
along and calling penalties when a rule is
broken, to making sure the athletes don't
unnecessarily hurt each other. Officials
are responsible for monitoring the game
clock and play clock, enforcing the rules
of the game, and recording all rule
infractions.

You often hear them referred to by the
general term of referee, but there is

actually only one referee on the field during a game. Each official (usually seven
in college and NFL games) has his own title and assigned responsibilities.

Following are the responsibilities of each along with their positioning on the field:

- Referee
- Umpire
- Head Linesman
- Line Judge
- Back Judge
- Field Judge
- Side Judge

The referee is the official that has control of the game and is generally the final
authority in all decisions. Among his duties are:

- Announce all penalties
- Explain penalties to the offending team's captain
- Explain penalties to the head coach of the offending team and inform him of
who it was called against
- Position himself in the backfield, approximately 10 yards behind the
quarterback, before each snap
- Monitor illegal hits on the quarterback
- Watch for illegal blocks near the quarterback
- Determine whether the yardage chains should be brought on the field for a
measurement

You can tell the referee from the other officials because he is the only one that wears a white hat.

The umpire is the official that lines up approximately five yards off the line of scrimmage on the defensive side of the ball. His duties include:

- Checking the legality of the players' equipment
- Making sure the offense has no more than 11 men on the field
- Monitor the legality of play on the line of scrimmage with a special emphasis on offensive holding and illegal linemen down field
- Assist the referee on decisions involving possession of the ball
- Record all timeouts
- Record all scores
- Record the winner of the coin toss
- Wipes the ball dry between plays on rainy days

The head linesman is the official that sets up straddling the line of scrimmage on the sideline designated by the referee. His duties include:

- Watch for line of scrimmage violations like offsides and encroachment
- Rule on all out-of-bounds plays on his side of the field
- Keep tabs on the chain crew
- Mark the chain to a yard marker on the field as a reference point for a measurement on the field
- Mark a players forward progress after a play is whistled dead
- Keep track of all eligible receivers
- Watch for illegal motion, illegal shifts, illegal use of hands, illegal men downfield

The line judge is the official who lines up on the opposite side of the field from the head linesman. His duties include:

- Assist the head linesman on in making illegal motion, illegal shifts, offside and encroachment calls
- Assist the umpire with illegal use of the hands and holding calls
- Assist the referee on false start calls
- Make sure the quarterback does not cross the line of scrimmage before throwing the ball
- Watch for offensive lineman going downfield too early on punts
- Supervise the timing of the game
- Supervise substitutions by the team on his side of the field

The back judge is the official who sets up 20 yards deep in the defensive backfield on the wide receiver side of the field. His duties include:

- Make sure the defensive team has no more than 11 players on the field
- Watch all eligible receivers on his side of the field
- Watch the area between the umpire and field judge
- Rule on the legality of catches and pass interference penalties

- Watch for clipping on kick returns
- On field goals, stand under the goalpost and rule on whether the kick is good

The field judge is the official that lines up 25 yards deep in the defensive backfield on the tight end side of the field. His duties include:

- Keep track of the play clock and call delay of game if it expires
- Make sure the defensive team has no more than 11 players on the field
- Rule on plays that cross the defense's goal line
- Watch all eligible receivers on his side of the field
- Rule on the legality of catches and pass interference penalties on the strong side of the field
- Mark the spot where a play goes out of bounds on his side of the field
- Watch for illegal use of hands by the receivers and defensive backs

The side judge is the official that lines up 20 yards deep in the defensive backfield. His duties are essentially the same as the back judge:

- Make sure the defensive team has no more than 11 players on the field
- Watch all eligible receivers on his side of the field
- Watch the area between the umpire and field judge
- Rule on the legality of catches and pass interference penalties
- Watch for clipping on kick returns