

FLAGS AND PENALTY COMMUNICATION

SHORT SUMMARY FOR HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL OFFICIALS

Purpose: A flag does not complete the job. Every foul must be accurately reported, communicated to the crew, explained to the proper team representative, enforced correctly, and signaled clearly to the press box and spectators.

1. CORE PRINCIPLE: PENALTY COMMUNICATION IS A CREW PROCESS

Penalty enforcement requires coordinated communication from the moment the flag is thrown until the penalty is accepted, declined, or otherwise resolved. A breakdown at any step can turn a routine foul into an avoidable enforcement problem.

- The calling official must get accurate information to the referee.
- The chain-side official must prevent the chains and down indicator from moving until enforcement is complete.
- The entire crew must know the foul, offending team, enforcement spot, distance, direction, and final result.
- Signals are part of the communication sequence. They speak to the press box, coaches, players, spectators, and crew.

2026-2027 NFHS OFFICIALS MANUAL POE EMPHASIS

The NFHS manual POE stresses that every foul must be reported to the press box and both coaches, and also communicated to the entire officiating crew because every official has a role in penalty enforcement.

2. NOTIFICATION AFTER THE FLAG

Once the ball is dead, the official who threw the flag must make sure the referee and the chain-side official know about the flag as soon as possible.

- Use three short whistle blasts after the ball is dead if needed to bring the flag to the referee's attention.
- The chain-side official holds the chains and down indicator in place.
- The referee prepares to receive the report and manage the penalty process.
- For a dead-ball foul before the snap, a wing official should jog slowly toward the middle of the field to report while continuing dead-ball officiating.

Reminder: Do not stop officiating just because you are reporting. Watch for retaliation, especially after encroachment, contact across the neutral zone, personal fouls, or emotional dead-ball action.

3. HOW TO REPORT A FOUL TO THE REFEREE

Best practice for reporting sequence: use deliberate, concise communication. Slow down, confirm what happened, and give the referee the facts needed to process the foul correctly.

Who reports?

- **One flag:** the calling official reports the foul to the referee.
- **Two or more flags:** calling officials confer away from the referee, players, and coaches. Only one official then reports to the referee.

Visual Flowchart: Calling Official Report to Referee

1	Result of Play	Incomplete, complete short/beyond line to gain, run result
	↓	
2	When Foul Occurred	Prior to snap, during run, during pass, during runback, dead ball
	↓	
3	What You Observed	Be descriptive: holding, block in back, facemask, etc.
	↓	
4	Who Fouled	Player number, if known. Do not guess.
	↓	
5	Which Team	Offense, defense, kicking team, receiving team
	↓	
6	Location of Foul	Confirm spot: "My flag is good" when appropriate

NOTE: If the offending team is on the opposite side of the official who called the foul, tell the official across from you or the back judge what the call was for, such as play through, hold and restrict, or other relevant status information.

Visual Flowchart: Referee Verbal Announcement Sequence

FOUL	→	NUMBER	→	TEAM	→	PENALTY	→	DOWN
Holding, facemask, etc.		Player number		Offense, defense, kicking, receiving		10 yards, declined, etc.		1st, 2nd, etc.

4. PRELIMINARY SIGNAL AND PRESS BOX COMMUNICATION

After receiving the report, the referee should move clear of players, face the press box, stand stationary, and signal the foul and offending team when appropriate.

- Be still before signaling. A stationary referee is easier to see and understand.
- Use the proper signal sequence. Signals communicate the foul, offending team, and penalty result.
- Avoid premature signals if the crew has not confirmed all flags and all relevant information.

5. EXPLAINING OPTIONS TO THE OFFENDED TEAM

Unless the penalty is automatically declined or is part of a double foul, the choices should be presented to the offended team's designated representative.

- State the options briefly, correctly, clearly, and courteously.
- Avoid technical explanations when plain language will work better.
- The umpire should listen to the referee's explanation to make sure the proper options are offered.
- Once the decision is made, the referee must communicate accepted or declined status to the crew.

6. COACH COMMUNICATION

The wing official on the penalized team's sideline should tell the coach the number of the fouling player and explain the foul in non-technical terms.

- Example: "The man in motion cut downfield too soon."
- Do not guess or invent a player number. If you do not know, say so.
- Use calm, factual language. Avoid debate, sarcasm, or overly technical rule language.
- Communication with coaches should support credibility, not create a new sideline problem.

7. ENFORCEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

After the penalty decision, each official must know their role in getting the enforcement right.

Official	Key Responsibility
Referee	Receive accurate report, explain options, communicate decision, give final signal to press box.
Umpire	Listen to options, confirm enforcement, know spot, distance, direction, and step off accepted penalty.
Line Judge	Hold the enforcement spot until penalty enforcement is confirmed correct.
Head Line Judge / Chain Side	Hold chains and down indicator; walk off penalty yardage on sideline as umpire enforces.
Calling Official	Provide clear foul information, offender, spot/status details, and coach information when appropriate.

8. FINAL SIGNAL AND RESET

When enforcement is complete, the referee again moves clear of players, faces the press box, stands stationary, and gives the final signal sequence for the foul and offending team.

- Confirm the down, distance, game clock status, play clock status, and line-to-gain before the next snap.
- Make sure both sidelines understand the result.
- Do not allow the next play to begin until the entire crew is aligned on enforcement and game administration.

CREW TAKEAWAY

Clean penalty communication follows a sequence: flag, notify, report, confirm, explain options, communicate decision, enforce, signal, and reset. Accuracy depends on the whole crew, not just the referee.

Prepared as a short officials handout using provided MHSAA mechanics material and the 2026-2027 NFHS Football Game Officials Manual Points of Emphasis topic on penalty communication. Always follow current NFHS rules, state association guidance, and your crew pregame.