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Football Rules Committee recommends restrictions on blocking

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The NCAA Football Rules Committee is recommending changes that better manage blocking below the waist in an effort to enhance player safety. Some low blocks will remain legal, but the committee is attempting to eliminate unsuspecting players from absorbing low blocks.

The committee developed the recommendations at its meeting this week in Indianapolis. All rules recommendations must be approved by the Playing Rules Oversight Panel, which meets via conference call April 14. The proposals will first be sent to the NCAA membership for comment.

Committee members cited player safety as the primary reason for modifying when players are allowed to block below the waist. Blocking below the waist will now be illegal except on scrimmage plays in the following instances:

- Wide receivers more than seven yards from the center at the snap of the ball can block below the waist only against a player facing him or toward the nearest sideline.
- Running backs/receivers in the backfield and outside the tackle box (the area five yards on either side of the center) or players in motion can block below the waist only on players facing them or toward the nearest sideline.

Players on the line of scrimmage within seven yards of the center are still allowed to block below the waist anywhere on the field. The purpose of the change is to take away blocking below the waist against unsuspecting defenders.

Previously, officials had to determine where a player started at the snap, or in the case of wide receivers, how far down the field the receiver was to determine whether the block below the waist was legal.

"This is a significant change because now the default philosophy is that blocking below the waist is *illegal* except under these circumstances," said Rogers Redding, who is the secretary-rules editor of the committee. "Before, the philosophy was that blocking below the waist was legal, but there was an extensive list of times when you couldn't do it."

Also in the player-safety vein, the committee recommended penalizing instances where three defensive players line up shoulder-to-shoulder and move forward on place kicks. Coaches on the committee cited examples of where one offensive lineman is overpowered by three defensive players in an attempt to penetrate the line of scrimmage in order to block a kick.

"The concern is that an offensive lineman is being triple-teamed while in a vulnerable position on kick plays," said Scot Dapp, chair of the committee and head coach at Moravian.

The penalty for this infraction would be five yards from the spot of the ball.

The committee also is recommending a 10-second rundown of the game clock if a team commits a foul that stops the clock in the final minute of both halves.

The opponent has three options in this case:

- Take the yardage penalty and the 10-second rundown.
- Take the yardage penalty without the 10-second rundown.
- Decline both the 10-second rundown and the penalty yardage.

"The idea is to prevent a team from gaining an advantage by committing a foul to stop the clock," said Redding, who also serves as college football's national coordinator of officials.

The committee also discussed the trend of players' helmets coming off during play. After considering rule proposals, including forcing a player whose helmet has been dislodged to leave the game for a play, the committee decided to make equipment a point of emphasis for coaches and officials in 2011. This will include ensuring that players have all four points of the chin strap buckled and making sure all players are wearing a mouthpiece and other required equipment.

The committee plans to gather data on how many helmets come off during the 2011 season and whether this is a safety concern. The matter also will be surveyed and remain on the committee's list of future considerations.

"Our officials and coaches can do a better job of being more diligent and paying attention to these things," Redding said. "We just want everyone to be on notice that this is something we all should be doing."

Umpire alignment

The committee is encouraging conferences to experiment with having the umpire line up in the backfield during spring practices and spring games to collect feedback on whether it helps umpires be in a better position to call the game. The umpire, who watches play in the area of the center and guards, currently stands behind the defensive linemen. The National Football League moved the umpire into the offensive backfield in 2010, with the exception of the last five minutes of the first half and last two minutes of the second half.

Committee members want to judge whether the umpire can do the job more efficiently by having more of an angle to see a play. Of particular interest to the committee is how the umpire might be better equipped to see the backside of a play.

"The officiating community wants the guidance of the rules committee on what their thinking is on this," Redding said. "We'll see if this is something that

should be done at some point in the future."

The committee also adjusted the rule for intentional grounding. Previously, intentional grounding was called if a receiver did not have a reasonable opportunity to catch the ball. Now, as long as an eligible receiver is in the area of the pass, intentional grounding will not be called.

New taunting rule poised for 2011

The committee also reiterated a rule change made last year but not effective until the 2011 season when unsportsmanlike conduct penalties will be treated as either live-ball or dead-ball fouls. Previously, all fouls of this kind were treated as dead-ball fouls.

The change means, for example, that if a player makes a taunting gesture to an opponent on the way to scoring a touchdown, the flag would nullify the score and penalize the offending team 15 yards from the spot of the foul.

Penalties for dead-ball misconduct fouls (for example, unsportsmanlike behavior after the player crosses the goal line) continue to be assessed on the ensuing kickoff or the extra point/two point conversion attempt.

Another rule that goes into effect this season is video monitors being allowed in the coaches' booth for the purpose of determining whether a team should request an instant-replay challenge. Only a live broadcast of the game will be allowed (that is, no editing/rewinding capabilities). If monitors are installed, the home team must provide the same equipment in both coaching booths.

Future consideration

Committee members discussed the possibility that teams may be feigning injuries as a tactic to gain an advantage during the game. For example, there is a concern that teams may use this to slow down a team that is running a no-huddle offense.

The committee noted that the Football Code under the coaching ethics portion of the NCAA Football Rules Book prohibits the faking of injuries. This is also a concern of the American Football Coaches Association as being an unethical practice.

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