

## The Neutral Zone and the Passing Game

### The neutral zone.

We all should know that, during a scrimmage down, the neutral zone is established by the placement of the ball. But fewer of us may realize that the neutral zone is key in determining legal and illegal actions during a play with a forward pass. This article will deal with several aspects of the passing game where understanding what happens in relation to the neutral zone is important.

### Illegal Forward Passes

The first item that will be covered is an illegal forward pass. At what point is a player considered to have passed the ball and how do officials determine if he was beyond the line of scrimmage? Rule 7-5-1 states, "*It is a legal forward pass, if during a scrimmage down and before team possession has changed, a player of A throws the ball with both feet of the passer in or behind the neutral zone when the ball is released.*"

This rule gives us two important clues. First, it is an illegal pass if either of the player's feet are beyond the neutral zone when the pass is thrown. The rule makers do not care if the foot over the neutral zone is in contact with the ground or not. Second, for purposes of determining a legality of a forward pass, a pass begins when the passer releases the ball. If one foot is over the neutral zone when the pass is released, the player has thrown an illegal forward pass. One item to note is that the rule does not make going beyond the neutral zone the retreating behind the neutral zone and throwing a forward pass illegal. The rule simply states that any forward pass must NOT originate from beyond the neutral zone.

### Pass Interference Restrictions and the Neutral Zone

Understanding where players are located in relation to the neutral zone and where the ball is possessed or lands incomplete is important for understanding pass interference restrictions. Rule 7-5-7 states, "*Pass interference restrictions only apply **beyond the neutral zone** (emphasis mine) and only if the legal forward pass, untouched by B in or behind the neutral zone, crosses the neutral zone.*" We learn from this rule that pass interference cannot be called if a forward pass never crosses the neutral zone. Pass interference cannot be called if contact occurs between opponents behind the neutral zone. In other words, defenders may legally block any receiver who is behind the neutral zone as long as the block itself is legal. Offensive players may legally block defenders from playing any forward pass that does not cross the neutral zone without committing pass interference (again, as long as the block is legal). **IMPORTANT NOTE:** This rule does not give either team free license to tackle an opponent who isn't beyond the neutral zone simply to prevent him from running his pass route or from catching a pass behind the neutral zone. Pass interference cannot be called when a forward pass never crosses the neutral zone.

## **Ineligibles and the Neutral Zone**

Knowing where a pass is possessed or lands incomplete is important for understanding how to rule on ineligible players running downfield. Rule 7-5-12 states, *"Ineligible A players may not advance beyond the expanded neutral zone on a legal forward pass play before the last pass which crosses the line of scrimmage is in flight. If B touches the pass in or behind the neutral zone, this restriction is terminated."* Reading this rule, we see that ineligible offensive lineman cannot go beyond the expanded neutral zone until a forward pass is thrown if a forward pass crosses the neutral zone. The rule is specific in identifying WHEN an ineligible player is illegally downfield and the specific case is when a forward pass crosses the neutral zone. Taking this a step further, the rule does not make it illegal for an ineligible player to go downfield if a forward pass does NOT cross the neutral zone. This makes screen plays where linemen head downfield and then a pass is thrown to a back who possesses the ball behind the line of scrimmage a legal play.

## **Summary**

We've seen three rules where the neutral zone affects the passing game. First, we've learned WHERE a passer must be and when a player is considered to have passed the ball. Second, we've seen that pass interference can NEVER be called if contact between opponents occurs behind the neutral zone or if a forward pass never crosses the neutral zone. Third, we've seen that ineligibles downfield can only be called if a pass travels over the neutral zone. Knowing the location of the neutral zone is important for making the proper ruling on all of these plays.