November 19, 2025

NFHS Basketball Weekly Rule Interpretations

Rule Reference: 4-34-1 – Definition of a Player (2025)

Purpose

The purpose of this interpretation is to clarify the updated definition of a player and ensure consistent enforcement by officials. By recognizing that a player is one of the five team members legally on the court at any given time—except during time-outs or intermissions—officials, coaches, and players can avoid misapplication of penalties and maintain accountability for all team conduct. This clarification:

- Helps distinguish between players on the court, substitutes, and bench personnel during dead ball periods.
- Supports consistent enforcement of rules regarding penalties for technical fouls.
- Reinforces that coaches are accountable for the conduct of all team members during time-outs and intermissions.

Rule Language

4-34-1 – Definition of a Player:

"A player is defined as one of the five team members legally on the court at any given time, except during time-outs or intermissions. This clarification ensures proper identification of players and accountability of the team."

Interpretation

- A player is only considered as such while actively on the court during live play or during brief dead ball periods other than time-outs or intermissions (e.g. after fouls, violations, held ball situations, etc.)
- During time-outs and intermissions, all five players for each team become bench personnel for the purpose of penalizing unsporting behavior.
- During time-outs, intermissions, or other stoppages, all individuals who are part of or affiliated with a team, including, but not limited to: substitutes, coaches, manager(s) and statistician(s) are considered bench personnel.
- Time-outs start when the official signals for the table to start the time-out clock.
- Intermissions begin when the signal illuminates or sounds indicating time has expired in the previous quarter/extra period except when free throws are awarded because of a foul as time expires. When this additional activity is needed, the quarter ends when free throws are completed.
- Officials should focus enforcement on players on the court, while maintaining accountability of the team through the coach for any misconduct by substitutes or bench personnel.
- Time-outs and intermissions end when the ball becomes live following the time-out or intermission.

Game Scenario #1:
After a time-out is granted, A-1 is walking toward the bench area and directs an unsporting comment toward an official **a)** before the official directs the timer to start the clock for the time-out **b)** after the official directs the timer to start the clock for the time-out.

In both **a)** and **b)** A-1 is charged with an unsporting technical foul. In **b)** the technical foul is also charged indirectly to the head coach of Team A which results in loss of coaching-box privileges.

RULING: Correct Procedure. After the timer was directed to start the clock for the time-out, A-1 becomes bench personnel.

Game Scenario #2
During a timeout in the final minute, a substitute A-6 leaves the bench area and verbally directs a comment toward an official in a manner deemed unsportsmanlike. A-6 is considered bench personnel is charged with a technical foul. The technical foul is also indirectly charged to the Team A head coach, who is responsible for bench conduct.

RULING: Correct Procedure

COMMENT: These scenarios help officials:

- Correctly distinguish players versus bench personnel during dead ball periods during the game.
- Prevent misapplication of penalties for technical fouls that will be charged to players, bench personnel and head coaches.
- Hold coaches accountable for team conduct during time-outs and intermissions.

Points of Emphasis for Officials and Coaches

- Player designation: Only five team members on the court are players at any given time.
- Non-player personnel: Substitutes, bench staff, and others on the floor during time-outs or intermissions are not considered players.
- Accountability: Coaches are responsible for the behavior of all team personnel during non-play periods.
- Consistent enforcement: Ensures correct application of technical fouls penalties and avoid confusion and misinterpretation of the rules.