



January 21, 2026

NFHS Basketball Weekly Rule Interpretations

2025-26 Points of Emphasis: Contact on the Ball Handler and End-of-Game Contact

Rule Reference: 4-19-3 (Intentional Foul)

Purpose

This 2025-26 Point of Emphasis reinforces the need for consistent enforcement of illegal contact involving the ball handler.

Particular attention is required during late-game situations, where strategic fouling often occurs. While fouling to stop the clock is an accepted coaching and playing strategy, it does not change the standards by which the contact is evaluated.

Prior to the 2025-26 season, the NFHS Basketball Rules Committee approved an editorial revision deleting the phrase on contact “that is specifically designed to stop the clock or keep it from starting,” from the intentional foul rule (4-19-3c), further clarifying that intentional foul rulings are based on the nature of the contact, not the game situation.

- Officials must apply the same standards throughout the game, including late-game scenarios.
- Determinations regarding intentional fouls must be based on the act itself, not on game context, score, time remaining, or verbal directives from the head coach. (e.g., “foul” or “red”).
- Distinguishing between incidental contact, common fouls and intentional fouls is imperative to ensure we are fair to both teams at the end of the game.

Rule Language

Rule 4-19-3 defines an intentional foul as a personal or technical foul that may or may not be premeditated and is not based solely on the severity of the act.

An intentional foul includes, but is not limited to:

- Contact that neutralizes an opponent’s obvious advantageous position.
- Contact away from the ball with an opponent who is clearly not involved in a play.
- Contact that is not a legitimate attempt to play the ball or the player.
- Excessive contact with an opponent while the ball is live or until an airborne shooter returns to the floor.
- Contact with a thrower-in.

Game Scenario #1

Late in the fourth quarter, Team B trails by six points. Team B's head coach instructs players to foul. B1 responds by reaching for the ball but illegally contacting A1 on the arm.

RULING: Reaching for the ball but illegally contacting A1 on the arm is a common foul, as B1 made a legitimate attempt to play the ball.

COMMENT: Fouling near the end of a game is an acceptable coaching and playing strategy. Officials must determine if a foul is intentional by judging the fouling act itself, not whether or not the coach instructed a player to perform the act. (4.19.3D)

Game Scenario #2

Late in the fourth quarter, Team A leads by three points and Team B wishes to foul to stop the clock. B1 from behind grabs A1 and pulls them to the floor.

RULING: This is an intentional foul as the contact is not a legitimate attempt to play the ball or the player. (4.19.3.G)

Game Scenario #3

Late in the fourth quarter, Team A leads by three points and Team B wishes to foul to stop the clock. From behind, B1 reaches but is unable to keep a hand on A1 as they advance the ball toward the frontcourt.

RULING: The contact is incidental and play shall continue. B1 could not keep a hand on the dribbler, and the contact did not inhibit the freedom of movement of A1.

COMMENT: It is imperative for officials to understand that ruling incidental contact to be illegal in late game situations can create an unfair advantage for the team that is behind. The team that is ahead would prefer to maintain possession and keep the clock running. Officials should not change how they rule on incidental contact, even when they know the defensive team wants to foul. (4.19.3.G)

Interpretation & Enforcement

- Incidental Contact: Contact which does not hinder the opponent from participating in normal offensive movements.
- Common foul: Any illegal contact during a legitimate basketball plays on either the ball handler or while playing defense on a player away from the ball.
- Intentional foul: Excessive, non-basketball in nature, away from the ball, or clearly removes an opponent's advantageous position.

Officials must penalize all illegal contact that restricts the ball handler's freedom of movement, regardless of game time or strategy.