



October 21, 2026

NFHS Soccer Weekly Rule Interpretations

State Tournament Reminders

Rules References: 7-3-1, 12-7 SPA, 12-8 DOGSO

As we head into the playoffs, remember that consistency, fairness, and sportsmanship define the standard for every game. Let's finish strong by representing high school athletics with integrity and pride. Have an outstanding championship season.

Tie-Breaking Procedures

For officials managing postseason soccer matches, mastering and strictly following state-specific tie-breaking procedures is critical. In single-elimination tournaments where one team advances and another's season ends, there is zero margin for error.

Because overtime rules and shootout formats vary widely across state associations, officials must verify their state's exact tie-breaking protocols well before match day. Never assume rules are universal. If there is any ambiguity, seek clarification from your state association or assignor. Key questions your crew must confirm in advance include:

- Overtime structure: Is overtime played? If so, how long are the periods? Are they played in full, or does a "golden goal" (sudden victory) apply?
- Kicks from the mark: How many kickers participate per round? Who is eligible to kick (e.g., all rostered players vs. only those on the field at the final whistle)?
- In-game discipline: How are cautions, disqualifications, and misconduct enforced during penalty kicks? Are you following NFHS Sample Tie-Breaking Procedures and Protocols?

Proactive officiating prevents controversy. Crews should bring a printed copy of the state's tie-breaking policy to the pitch and review the procedure with head coaches and captains during the pre-game meeting.

SITUATION 1: Team A and B are tied after 80 minutes of play in the first round of the state series. The referee instructs both teams to return to their team areas and puts a set time on the clock for coaches to confer with their teams and athletes to get a drink of water. The referee and their crew confer as to the state association procedures for overtime and call the coaches and captains over for a coin toss as per

Rule 5-2-2. The referee reminds the teams that the state has set the tie-break procedures for two 10-minute overtimes and then will go to penalty kicks. **RULING:** Correct procedure. **COMMENT:** Each state association may adopt tie-breaking procedures. (7-3-1)

SITUATION 2: Team A and B are tied after overtime, and the state association has adopted the NFHS tie-breaking procedures so both teams will now go to penalty kicks. The state association has elected to have five players shoot in the first round of penalty kicks and if still tied, select five more players to shoot. In the first round, Player A1 is cautioned before the kicks begin. The referee informs the coach that A1 is not eligible to take a penalty kick in round 1 but would be eligible if it goes to a second round of kicks. The game is tied after the first five kicks from both teams and A1 is set to kick the 6th penalty kick. **RULING:** Correct procedure. **COMMENT:** Each state association may adopt tie-breaking procedures. Unless stated in the state association's terms and conditions, the rules of the game still apply and since A1 received a yellow card in the first round, they are not eligible to attempt a penalty kick until the second round if the teams are still tied. (NFHS Tie-Breaking Procedures)

Tactical Foul

As covered in earlier interpretations, tactical fouls disrupt transitions and must be dealt with consistently:

- **SPA (Yellow Card):** Breaks up a promising attack. If committed inside the penalty area with a genuine attempt to play the ball, no card is issued (the penalty kick restores the advantage).
- **DOGSO (Red Card):** Requires all four criteria (**D**istance, **D**irection, **D**efenders, **B**all **C**ontrol).
- **Penalty Area Downgrade:** A DOGSO offense inside the penalty area is downgraded to a caution (yellow card) only when the defender makes an attempt to play the ball. Non-soccer actions (holding, pulling, pushing, no possibility to play the ball, or handball) remain a mandatory ejection (red card).

Unlike other sports, like basketball, where tactical strategies include fouling opponents to force a change of possession, soccer expressly prohibits tactical fouls. Recognizing these subtle, and sometimes cynical, actions are critical for post-season officials to maintain fair competition.

Note: Reckless challenges and fouls that use excessive force are never downgraded, regardless of tactical context.

SITUATION 1: Attacker A1 intercepts the ball near the halfway line. With open space to mount a counterattack with support from two teammates, A1 dribbles toward the goal, creating a promising attack against two defenders. Seeing the three-on-two disadvantage, opposing midfielder B6, challenges A1 from the side and carelessly trips A1 with minimal contact. The referee stops play, awards a direct free kick to Team A, and cautions (yellow card) B6 for unsporting conduct. **RULING:** Correct procedure. **COMMENT:** The careless trip is correctly recognized by the referee as a tactical foul that interrupted or stopped the promising attack, which falls under unsporting conduct sanctioned with a caution (yellow card).

SITUATION 2: Player A2, in control of the ball on a breakaway, dribbles at a rapid pace into the attacking third of the field. Only defending goalkeeper, B0, is between A2 and the goal. Goalkeeper B0 comes out of the penalty area to challenge the attacker, who is uncontested. The goalkeeper dives toward the ball and collects it with their hands inside the penalty arc. The referee stops play, awards a penalty kick, and cautions (yellow card) B0 for unsporting conduct. **RULING:** Incorrect procedure. **COMMENT:** The penalty arc is not part of the penalty area, so the referee should have awarded a direct free kick to Team A. The goalkeeper committed a handball foul outside their penalty area which denied an obvious goal-scoring opportunity. Therefore, B0 should be ejected and shown the red card.

SITUATION 3: Defender B12, inside their penalty area, commits a direct free kick foul that stops a promising attack. The referee stops play and awards a penalty kick to Team A because B12, while attempting to play the ball, (a) carelessly tripped an attacker; (b) recklessly tripped an attacker; (c) tripped an attacker with excessive force. **RULING:** The referee (a) shows B12 no card; (b) cautions B12 and shows the yellow card; (c) ejects B12 and shows the red card. **COMMENT:** The promising attack is restored by the referee awarding a penalty kick. In (a), B12 faces no further disciplinary sanction for their careless foul that was an attempt to play the ball. In (b) and (c), regardless of the penalty kick being awarded or B12's attempt to play the ball, the nature of the contact is sanctioned with (b) a caution (yellow card) for unsporting conduct due to reckless play, and (c) an ejection (red card) for serious foul play due to the use of excessive force.

SITUATION 4: Defender B10, inside their penalty area, commits a direct free kick foul that denies an obvious goal-scoring opportunity. The referee stops play and awards a penalty kick to Team A because B10, while attempting to play the ball, (a) carelessly kicked an attacker; (b) recklessly kicked an attacker; (c) kicked an attacker with excessive force. **RULING:** In (a) and (b), the referee cautions B10 and shows the yellow card. In (c), the referee ejects B10 and shows the red card. **COMMENT:** The goal-scoring opportunity is restored by the referee awarding a penalty kick. In (a), B10 is cautioned (yellow card) for unsporting conduct because B10 attempted to play the ball, so their DOGSO offense is downgraded. In (b) and (c), regardless of the penalty kick being awarded or B10's attempt to play the ball, the nature of the contact is sanctioned with (b) a caution (yellow card) for unsporting conduct due to reckless play, and (c), an ejection (red card) for serious foul play due to the use of excessive force.