



Memorandum

October 4, 2007

TO: Denise Edwards, President, Virginia Youth Soccer Association
FROM: Scott K. Meyer, State Referee Administrator
SUBJECT: Offside

Recently there has been a lot of focus and discussion on the “new interpretation” of Law 11 – Offside. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide you with an explanation that can be distributed to your members in the hopes that all of us – players, coaches, referees, and administrators – can be on the “same page” with regard to offside.

Before reviewing Offside and discussing the new interpretation, it is important that everyone understand several things:

First, there has been no change in Law 11 – Offside. It reads the same today as it has for the past several years.

Second, last year the International FA Board (IFAB) issued changes to the definitions in the ways a player can become actively involved in play by “interfering with play”; “interfering with an opponent” and “gaining an advantage.”

Third, USSF and the State Referee Program has been emphasizing the new interpretation in Senior Referee Clinics, Instructor Clinics, and other forums such as the VYSA workshop sessions this past February. We will continue to focus on this in referee classes for the next year in an effort to ensure that all our referees have a common understanding of Offside and how it is to be called.

Fourth, over the years the IFAB has been gradually revising Law 11 – Offside, its interpretations of Law 11, and its instructions to referees with the objective of promoting more attacking football.

The fourth point, above, is critical for it sets a tone or overall philosophy behind what FIFA, USSF, and the State Referee Program are telling referees. Years ago the thinking among referees tended to be, “If you are not sure but think the player might be offside, raise the flag and call offside.” As a result, the defense was favored, many “good” goals were called back, and the overall flow of the game was continually being interrupted for restarts after an Offside call. Now the guidance has swung all the way in the other direction. Referees are clearly being told, “If in doubt, keep the flag down and do not call Offside.” The offense is now favored over the defense, fewer “good” goals should be called back, and the game should now flow more with fewer interruptions.

Review of Offside

For a player to be penalized for Offside, two things must happen. First, the player must be in an offside position when the ball is last played by a teammate. Second, that player must then—

1. Interfere with play,
2. Interfere with an opponent, OR
3. Gain an advantage from that position

And, of course, a player can never be guilty of the offside violation if he/she receives the ball directly from a Corner Kick, Throw in, or Goal Kick, nor when the player is in his/her own half of the field. Referees are taught that they must make two judgments: First, was the player in an Offside position and then, second, did the player interfere with play, interfere with an opponent, or gain an advantage. Only if the answer is “yes” to *both* questions should the player be penalized for being Offside. The key point is that there is nothing wrong with being in an offside¹ position. Players can be in an offside position all the time.

¹ It is helpful to understand what “offside” originally meant in soccer. Note that the word is “offside” and not “offsides” as used in American football. “Offside” in soccer originally meant that the player had taken himself “off” his “side” (meaning team in soccer) and therefore could not participate in play until he rejoined his team (side). Being “off” his “side” was OK. It just meant that the player couldn’t participate until after the player got back “on” his “side.”

Nothing requires the player to be onside. The Laws of the Game simply say that a player who is in an offside position cannot participate in play by one of the three things stated above: interfering with play, interfering with an opponent, or gaining an advantage.

New Interpretation

The IFAB issued two decisions about Law 11 (Offside), effective 1 July 2005, by defining what is meant by “being in an Offside position” and “interfering with play,” “interfering with an opponent” and “gaining an advantage from an offside position.” The first decision addresses the criterion used in judging the definition of “being in an Offside position.” Law 11 states that a player is in an Offside position if the player is in the opponents half of the field and is closer to the goal than both the ball and the second to last defender. The new decision clarifies that only those parts of the body that can legally score a goal are to be considered when judging if the attacking player is nearer the goal than an opponent and the ball. In other words, a player is in an Offside **position** (but not necessarily Offside) if the attacking player’s head, foot, leg, or torso is ahead of the second to the last defender and the ball. We don’t care if the hand or arm is ahead because players (except for Maradona in the World Cup) cannot legally score with the hand or arm.

The second decision deals with the very important definition of what it means to be “interfering with play.” In the past, referees were taught that if the player in the Offside position was in the active area of play (i.e. near the ball) *and made any movement toward the ball*, then that player was considered to have interfered with play and was called Offside. Now, “interfering with play” means playing or *touching the ball passed to him/her by a teammate*.

The following illustrates the difference between the old and new definitions and interpretations of “interfering with play.” Consider that a player is in the Offside position near the halfway line (in the player’s attacking half of the field). His teammate makes a long pass into the opponent’s end of the field and the player in the Offside position runs after it. At the same time, a teammate who was *not* in an Offside position begins running for the ball. We now have two players, one who was and one who was not in an Offside position going for the ball. Under the old interpretation, the Assistant Referee would have raised the flag immediately upon seeing the player in the Offside position going for the ball and the referee would have called Offside. Now, however, the Assistant Referee and the Referee must wait and see which player touches the ball. If the player in the Offside position touches the ball first, then the Assistant Referee will raise the flag and the Referee will call Offside. If the player who was not in the Offside position touches the ball first, then there is no Offside².

Similar definitions were made by the IFAB on the meaning of interfering with an opponent (i.e. preventing an opponent from playing, obstructing his/her path to or line of vision of the ball or gestures to distract an opponent) as well as gaining an advantage by being in an offside position (i.e. a ball rebounding off the goal post or crossbar or deflecting off an opponent).³

It is very conceivable, as did happen to me recently, that the Assistant Referee and I as the Referee had to run almost all the way to the end line, waiting to see who would touch the ball first, before deciding whether or not to call Offside. If, as in this case, the Offside player touched the ball first, then the Offside occurred *not* where the player finally touched the ball, but rather back up near the midfield where the player was when the ball was last touched by a teammate.

More Information

Attached to this memorandum is the USSF memorandum on Offside issued in August 2005. This is the “official” word from USSF on the subject. A person may also wish to go to the State Referee Program web site at www.vadesoccerref.com and read the article called “What’s Happening with Offside.” This contains several links to other information including a link to a PowerPoint presentation that our instructors are using with referees during their certification and re-certification classes. The State Director of Instruction, Paul Mungra, will also be glad to arrange for an instructor to come to any club meeting or gathering of parents or coaches to make a presentation on Offside, including video clips that illustrate the concepts.

Patience

The Offside law, its interpretation, and the instructions to referees have been gradually changing to allow more attacking football. Each time a change is made, it takes awhile to communicate the change to the referees, longer yet until all the referees have a common understanding, and in most cases even longer yet for coaches, players, and administrators to understand the changes.

² This assumes, of course, that the player in the Offside position did not interfere with an opponent while chasing the ball. It is important to understand that a player does not have to touch the ball to be Offside. The player can interfere with an opponent, and thus be Offside, without touching the ball.

³ These, however, did not change as much as “interfering with the ball” changed and, therefore, are of lesser concern to us in understanding “what changed.”

Even when that is accomplished, there is lots of room for interpretation and it takes awhile (probably a *long* while) until everyone is applying the same interpretation. In the meantime, there will be inconsistencies among the referees (and misunderstandings and lack of up-to-date knowledge by coaches, players, and administrators). That is something we have to accept, knowing that we in the referee program are doing our best to get all the referees “on the same page.” In the meantime, it will help if players, coaches, parents, and administrators understand what has changed and not be overly critical of the referees *especially* when the referees “got it right” and the criticism is based on an outdated interpretation of the law.



Memorandum

To:
State Referee Administrators
State Directors of Referee Instruction
State Directors of Referee Assessment
Chair, State Referee Committee
National Referees, Assessors and Instructors

From:
Alfred Kleinaitis
Manager of Referee Development and Education

Re:
Law 11 – Offside
IFAB advice on the application of Law 11, Decision 2

Date:
August 24 , 2005

The International Football Association Board (IFAB) revised Law 11 (Offside) effective 1 July 2005 by, among other things, incorporating definitions of what it means to “interfere with play,” “interfere with an opponent,” and “gain an advantage by being in an offside position.” The **USSF Advice to Referees** section of Memorandum 2005 ended its discussion of the addition of these three definitions by noting:

Referees are reminded that the reference to “playing or touching the ball” does not mean that an offside infraction cannot be called until an attacker in an offside position actually touches the ball.

Because of recent developments which appear to focus on “touching the ball,” there has been some confusion about the above statement. **“Touching the ball” is not a requirement for calling an offside violation if the attacker is interfering with an opponent by making a movement or gesture which, in the opinion of the referee, deceives or distracts that opponent.** What the International Board has recently emphasized is that, in the unlikely event an attacker in an offside position is not challenged by any opponent, the attacker should not be ruled offside unless and until the attacker physically touches the ball.

This emphasis is both simple and easily implemented:

An attacker in an offside position who is not challenged by any opponent and not competing for the ball with a teammate coming from an onside position who could, in the opinion of the officiating team, get to the ball first should not be ruled offside for interfering with play or gaining an advantage unless that attacker actually touches the ball. In a close race between an onside and an offside attacker, it would be necessary to see which player touches the ball before deciding if an offside offense has occurred.

An attacker in an offside position whose gestures or movements, in the opinion of the officiating team, cause an opponent to challenge for the ball has interfered with an opponent and should be ruled offside whether the attacker touches the ball or not.

The International Board issued a Circular on August 17, 2005, which reaffirmed the above approach. As the Board stated (emphasis added): "A player in an offside position may be penalized before playing or touching the ball if, in the opinion of the referee, no other teammate in an onside position has the opportunity to play the ball." Further, "If an opponent becomes involved in the play and if, in the opinion of the referee, there is potential for physical contact, the player in the offside position shall be penalized for interfering with an opponent." Finally, the Board confirmed the requirement that the indirect free kick restart for an offside offense is taken "from the initial place where the player was adjudged to be in an offside position."

All referees, instructors, and assessors should review these guidelines carefully. It is important that officials understand and handle the offside offense in a correct, consistent, and realistic manner. Personal interpretations which differ from the approach outlined here can only cause confusion and hard feelings on the part of players, team officials, and spectators