

LAW 11 – Offside

**An explanation for intermediate
and advanced youth referees**

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Introduction:

Law 11, while one of the shorter laws, is often the subject of very long and heated discussions. Most of this is not needed because it is a fairly simple, but misunderstood law. Once the basics are understood, consistently applying those basics to any situation will give the correct call.

During a game, the offside infraction often involves split second actions on various parts of the field. Seeing all the aspects needed to make the correct judgement is far more challenging than knowing the correct call once the facts are known.

There have been changes to the offside law since it was part of the original laws of the game which were formulated in 1863. The purpose of the law was and is to make sure that a team earns a goal. If you were standing behind the defense as your team was trying to work the ball up the field, you were not really a part of your team. You were off your team, or side. Therefore the term: offside.

The original law required all players to be behind the ball. The 1863 laws read: When a player has kicked the ball, any one of the same side who is nearer to the opponent's goal line is out of play and may not touch the ball himself, nor in any way whatever prevent any other player from doing so, until he is in play; but no player is out of play when the ball is kicked off from behind the goal line.

By 1870 this was changed to require three defensive players to be ahead of an attacker for that attacker to be considered on-side. Over the years in an attempt to increase the offense and to minimize the use of this law to prevent any scoring, the requirements for being on-side have been significantly reduced.

What is an offside infraction?

Simply put, if an attacker is in an offside position at the beginning of a play, she cannot be involved in that play.

What is an offside position?

To be in an offside position a player must be:

Ahead of the ball

Be nearer to the opponent's goal line than the second to last defender

And not be in the defending half of the field

The position of a player is determined by where the center of her torso is, not the head, legs or arms. As described below the position of the feet is often used to determine where the center of the torso must be.

The attacking half of the field begins at the halfway line. Since a line is a part of the area it describes, the halfway line is in both the attacking and defending

halves of the field. If the center of an attacker's torso is over the halfway line it is in the defending half of the field and therefore the attacker cannot be in an offside position, even though he is also in the attacking half. If the torso is closer to the opponent's goal line than the halfway line, that attacker is not in the defending half of the field and therefore could be in an offside position.

Considering the need for balance and a normal stance, an attacker is considered to be in the defending half of the field if both of his feet are on or behind the halfway line. If either foot extends into the attacking half beyond the halfway line, that attacker is usually considered in the attacking half and not in the defending half.

The last attacking player to touch the ball can never be guilty of an offside infraction by again becoming involved in active play. The law specifically says to judge the offside position when the ball was last touched by a teammate. The player is not her own teammate. Probably an easier way to understand this is that the player who touches the ball cannot be ahead of the ball. It does not matter if the player had her back to the goal line and moved the ball ahead with a bicycle kick. Even though her torso may have been closer to the goal line than the ball when she last touched the ball, she is not ahead of the ball because she was in contact with the ball.

If an attacker is even with one or both of the last two defenders (one of which is usually but not required to be the goalkeeper) then she is not closer to the opponent's goal line than the second to last defender, and therefore cannot be in an offside position. Again the position of the players is determined by the position of the center of the torsos. An attacker can be nearer to the goal line than a defender even if there is overlap of their torsos. It is the relative positions of the centers of torsos which determine the relative positions. As with the other laws of soccer, if it is not clear that the attacker is ahead of the defender, there should be no offside call. That is, the referee or assistant referee should err on the side of not making the call.

When does a play begin and end?

For the attacking team, a play ends and a new play starts every time an attacking player touches the ball. A play also ends for the attacking team whenever a defending player gains control of the ball. The mere deflection of the ball by a defender including a save by a goalkeeper does not end an attacking team's play. There must be control by the defender to end the play. The mere touch of the ball by the defender could start a play for the defending team, but not end the attacking team's play.

How does a player become involved in the play?

The law lists three ways in which a player can become involved in active play. They are:

- Interfering with an opponent
- Interfering with play

Or

Gaining an advantage

Interfering with an opponent

This includes preventing an opponent from moving to the ball, impeding. Contact with the opponent is not required. While the referee needs to avoid trifling calls, it is not required that the referee determine that the opponent was going to be able to make a play on the ball. Interfering with an opponent trying to become involved in the play is enough. Interfering with an opponent also includes any active physical or verbal distraction of the goalkeeper. This does include actions to screen the goalkeeper's line of sight.

It does not include mere presence of a player ahead of the ball. It does not include an opponent trying to defend against the player in the offside position, but is not in the area of active play, rather than defending against the player with the ball. It is not an infraction if the defense is drawn to the player in an offside position away from the attack. It is just a poor defensive tactic. But if that player in an offside position away from play moves towards and into the area of active play, then he is guilty of the offside infraction.

Interfering with play

This means that the player is in the area of active play and affects how play develops. It does not require that the player touch the ball. The player must be near the ball. It would include having a ball kicked very near the player including when the player jumps over the ball. Kicking the ball over an injured teammate, could cause an offside infraction. If the player is close enough to the ball, he can interfere with play even if he does not attempt to play the ball, such as in the case of the injured player.

This brings up the concept of the area of active play. A player who is in the area of active play is involved in (or interfering with) the play. There are no exact measurements for the area of active play like there are for the dimensions of the field. First the area of active play is in the opinion of the referee. It gets larger/smaller as the speed of play increases/decreases. It gets larger as the size and age of the players increases.

If the player is close enough to affect how play develops, she is involved in active play. If that player was in an offside position at the start of the play, then she is guilty of an offside infraction.

Gaining an advantage

This means to be close enough to capitalize immediately on a defensive error. This would include the rebound to a player who was in an offside position when the original shot was made. The rebound can be off the goal or a defensive player as long as the referee determines that the defender did not have "control" of the ball. The player is not involved in active play until the ball rebounds to

him, but the infraction occurred where he was when his teammate kicked the ball, not where he touched the ball.

What is the discipline for an offside infraction?

The defending team is awarded an indirect free kick from the spot where the player guilty of the offside infraction was when the ball was last touched by his teammate. It is not where the defender was. It is not where that player touched the ball, or otherwise became involved in active play.

Common Scenarios in youth soccer

A player passes the ball to a teammate in an offside position. OFFSIDE

A player passes the ball forward, but it is behind a player in an offside position. That player goes to play the ball. By the time he gets to the ball he is not in an offside position. OFFSIDE. When the ball was last touched by a teammate he was in an offside position, and he became involved in active play.

A team has a breakaway. The player with the ball is behind and to the side of a teammate. The player with the ball shoots and puts the ball in the goal. GOAL, NOT OFFSIDE. The player ahead of the ball was not involved in active play and did not interfere with an opponent.

A team has a breakaway. The player with the ball is behind and to the side of a teammate. The player with the ball waits until the player in the offside position is close to the goalkeeper, and then shoots and puts the ball in the goal. OFFSIDE. The player in the offside position is in the area of active play. Even without touching the ball or the goalkeeper he is interfering with play.

A team has a breakaway. The player with the ball is behind and to the side of a teammate. The player with the ball shoots and the ball rebounds off the goalkeeper to the teammate, who puts it in the goal. NO GOAL, OFFSIDE. The player in the offside position became involved in active play.

A team has a breakaway. The player with the ball is behind and to the side of a teammate. The player with the ball shoots, the player in front had cut across the path of the ball, but jumps over it to avoid being involved in the play. OFFSIDE. That player became involved in active play, by crossing the path of the ball. He also probably interfered with an opponent by blocking the goalkeeper's sight of the ball.

The offside infraction does not just involve fact, it also involves opinion, the opinion of the referee. If the referee is of the opinion that a player did not influence how play developed, did not prevent a defender from trying to become involved in play, nor did she gain any advantage from being in that offside position, then there is no offside infraction, no matter what the opinions of others are.

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Offside Position

It is not an offence in itself to be in an offside position.

A player is in an offside position if:

- *he is nearer to his opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second last opponent*

A player is not in an offside position if:

- *he is in his own half of the field of play*
or
- *he is level with the second last opponent*
or
- *he is level with the last two opponents*

Offence

A player in an offside position is only penalized if, at the moment the ball touches or is played by one of his team, he is, in the opinion of the referee, involved in active play by:

- *interfering with play*
or
- *interfering with an opponent*
or
- *gaining an advantage by being in that position*

No Offence

There is no offside offence if a player receives the ball directly from:

- *a goal kick*
or
- *a throw-in*
or
- *a corner kick*

Infringements/Sanctions

For any offside offence, the referee awards an indirect free kick to the opposing team to be taken from the place where the infringement occurred. * (see page 3)