The Most Misunderstood Basketball Rules

Note: Based on NFHS (National Federation of State High School Associations) rules.

This document is to be used as a quick reference and summary of the NFHS rule book. It is updated each year and highlights the Points of Emphasis and rule changes. As with any summary and simplification, full context can be loss, and this document does not override the rule book and case books in determining the correct ruling on a play.

2026-27 Relevant Points of Emphasis and Rule Changes:

• **Bench Decorum, Sportsmanship and Professional Conduct:** Sportsmanship is a core expectation. Positive sportsmanship enhances the experience for all participants. Unsporting behavior, excessive reactions, prolonged dissent, and inappropriate comments undermine the integrity of the game. Taunting – defined as action sor remarks intended to embarrass, ridicule or demean and opponent – has no place in basketball and must be addressed promptly and consistently by rule. Maintaining appropriate bench decorum ensures respect for opponents, officials, and the game itself.

• **Physical Play and Illegal Contact**
Basketball remains a physical game; however, unnecessary or illegal contact that creates disadvantage or safety concerns is not consistent with NFHS rules. Officials, coaches, and players must collectively ensure legal play is distinguished from illegal physical advantage.

Illegal contact includes hand checking, displacement, push-offs using the controlling arm, and other actions that restrict freedom of movement or violate legal guarding principles. Unnecessary roughness or overly aggressive play must be penalized to maintain safety and game control. Post play requires special attention, including illegal use of two hands on the back, forearm displacement, or dislodging a legally positioned opponent. Consistent enforcement supports fairness, safety, and proper game flow.

• **Traveling, Continuous Motion and Legal Player Movement**
Proper enforcement of traveling and continuous motion rules is increasingly important due to the evolving athletic nature of offensive play. Officials must have a strong understanding of footwork, pivot rules, and legal movement to properly judge plays without penalizing legitimate skill-based actions.

Moves such as euro-steps, spin moves, and jump stops are legal when executed within the limits of establishing and maintaining a pivot foot. However, dragging a pivot foot, taking extra steps, or failing to properly maintain a pivot foot when ending a dribble constitutes traveling. Officials must also accurately identify when continuous motion applies. If an opponent fouls after a player has started a try or tap for field goal, the player is permitted to complete the customary arm movement, and if pivoting or stepping when fouled, may complete the usual foot or body movement in any activity while holding the ball. Continuous motion ends when the ball is clearly in flight. Strong rule knowledge ensures fairness, consistency, and game flow.

Recent Rule Changes:



1. Throw-in spots: Throw-ins for the offense on their side of the court will occur in the closest of the four locations on non-shooting fouls and violations by the defense. If the defense causes the ball to be out of bounds the ball will be thrown in near the spot it went out of bounds.

2. Correcting a throw-in: Administering a throw-in to the wrong team can be corrected before the first dead ball after it has become live unless there has been a change in possession.

3. Leaving the court violation: Clarifies an existing rule about an offensive player leaving the court. The violation is called if the person is the first to touch the ball after coming back from out of bounds instead of "always" calling it.

Introduction:

1. Intent and Purpose of the Rules: It is important to know the intent and purpose of a rule so that it may be intelligently applied in each play situation. A player of a team should not be permitted an advantage which is not intended by a rule. Neither should play be permitted to develop which may lead to placing a player at a disadvantage not intended by a rule.

2. Judgement Calls: Officials are not required to explain judgment calls, but they may explain some calls if approached by the head coach in a respectful manner. Officials have been instructed to call technical fouls for profanity, unsporting acts, excessive complaints, or verbal abuse.

3. Official's Role: Officials are on the court to be the only unbiased arbiters of the game. Officials are not concerned with who wins, or loses, but only fairness, and safety. Everyone else in that gym cares about winning, and therefore, cannot look at the game objectively. Players commit fouls, and violations; officials view those infractions, judge the action, and then apply the rules of the game to what they had observed. The rules then determine the penalty.

Rules:

1. Backboard/Out of Play: The front, top, sides, and bottom of the backboard are all in play. The ball cannot legally pass over a rectangular backboard from either direction. The back of a backboard is out of bounds, as well as the supporting structures.

2. Out of Play: If a player's momentum carries the player off the court, that player can play the ball after returning inbounds. That player must not have left the court voluntarily and must immediately return

inbounds. That player must have something in, and nothing out. It is not necessary to have both feet back inbounds. However, It is a violation for a player to intentionally leave the court for an unauthorized reason and be the first to touch the ball upon reentering the play area.

To be out of bounds, a player must touch the floor, or some object, on or outside a boundary line. People are not considered to be objects, so inadvertently touching someone who is out of bounds (another player, a photographer, a coach, an official, etc.), without gaining an advantage, is not considered an out of bounds violation.

3. Traveling: The traveling rule is one of the most misunderstood rules in basketball. To start a dribble, the ball must be released before the pivot foot is lifted. On a pass, or a shot, the pivot foot may be lifted, but may not return to the floor before the ball is released. A player may slide on the floor while trying to secure a loose ball until that player's momentum stops. At that point that player cannot attempt to get up, or rollover. A player securing a ball while on the floor cannot attempt to stand up unless that player starts a dribble. A player in this situation may also pass, shoot, or request a timeout. If the player is flat on his, or her, back, that player may sit up without violating. A player holding the ball cannot touch the floor with a knee or any other body part other than the hand or foot.

A player must be in possession of the ball in order to travel. A player can't travel while dribbling, while tapping the ball, while fumbling it, or while trying to recover a loose ball. During a fumble the player is not in control of the ball, and therefore, cannot be called for a traveling violation. A fumble is the accidental loss of player control when the ball is unintentionally dropped or slips from a player's grasp. After a player has ended a dribble and fumbled the ball, that player may recover the ball without violating. Any steps taken during the recovery of a fumble are not traveling, regardless of how far the ball goes, and the amount of advantage that is gained. It is always legal to recover a fumble, even at the end of a dribble, however that player cannot begin a new dribble, which would be an illegal dribble violation. A player who fumbles the ball when receiving a pass may legally start a dribble.

The shooter can retrieve his or her own airball if the official considers it to be a shot attempt. The release ends team control. It is not a violation for that player to start another dribble at that point. When an airborne player keeps control of an attempted shot that is blocked, is unable to release the ball, and returns to the floor with it, that player has not traveled; it is a held ball. If, in a similar situation, the defender simply touches the ball, the airborne shooter maintains control of the ball, chooses not to release the ball, and returns to the floor holding the ball, it's a traveling violation. If, in a similar situation, the shooter

loses control of the ball because of the block, then this is simply a blocked shot, the release ends team control. It is not a violation for that player to start another dribble at that point. When an airborne player tries for goal, sees that the try will be blocked, purposely drops the ball, and touches the ball after it hits the floor, that player has traveled by starting a dribble with the pivot foot off the floor.

4. Carrying: Palming, or carrying, is when the ball comes to rest in the player's hand, and the player either travels with the ball, or illegally dribbles a second time. There is no restriction as to how high a player may bounce the ball, provided the ball does not come to rest in a player's hand. Steps taken during a dribble are not traveling, including several that are sometimes taken when a high dribble takes place. It is not possible for a player to travel during a dribble. It is not a dribble when a player stands still and holds the ball and touches it to the floor once or more than once.

5. Kicking: Kicking the ball is intentionally striking it with any part of the leg, or foot and any other method of playing the ball with your feet. An unintentionally kicked ball is never illegal, regardless of how far the ball goes, and who recovers it.

6. Held Ball: A held ball occurs when opponents have their hands so firmly on the ball that control cannot be obtained without undue roughness. It is a violation for a player to excessively swing his, or her, arms, or elbows, even without contacting an opponent. Action of arms, and elbows, resulting from total body movements as in pivoting or moving to prevent a held ball, or loss of control, shall not be considered excessive.

7. Closely Guarded: The closely guarded rule is in effect in frontcourt only, when a defender is within six feet of the ball handler. Up to three separate five second counts may occur on the same ball handler: holding, dribbling, and holding. The count continues even if defenders switch. The five second count ends when a dribbler gets his, or her, head, and shoulders, ahead of the defender.

8. Backcourt Violation: A ten second count continues when the defense (without gaining control) deflects, or bats, the ball in the backcourt. When a dribbler is advancing the ball into the frontcourt, the ball maintains backcourt status until both feet, and the ball, touch entirely in the frontcourt.

The four elements for having a backcourt violation are: there must be team control (and initial player control when coming from a throw-in); the ball must have achieved frontcourt status; the team in team control must be the last to touch the ball before it goes into the backcourt; that same team must be the first to touch after the ball has been in the backcourt.

During a throw-in, even under a team's own basket, if the throw-in is deflected, tipped, or batted, by an

offensive player in the frontcourt to an offensive player in the backcourt; or after a missed field goal attempt, or a missed foul shot attempt, if the ball is deflected, tipped, or batted, by an offensive player in the frontcourt to an offensive player in the backcourt; these are not a backcourt violations.
During a throw-in, or jump ball, any player; or a defensive player, in making a steal; may legally jump from his, or her, frontcourt, secure control of the ball with both feet off the floor, and return to the floor with one, or both, feet in the backcourt. The player may make a normal landing, and it makes no difference whether the first foot down is in the frontcourt, or the backcourt. These three situations are not backcourt violations.

9. Offensive 3-Seconds in the Key Violation: The intent of the three second rule is to not allow an offensive player in the lane to gain an advantage. The call should be made once a violating player makes an impact in the game (has the ball, gets passed the ball, sets a screen). There is no three second count between the release of a shot, and the control of a rebound, at which time a new count starts. There is no three second count during a throw-in. There is no three second count while the ball is in the backcourt. There is a three second count during an interrupted dribble. There is a three second count while an offensive player has one foot in the lane, and one foot outside of the lane, and the three second count continues if this player lifts the foot in the lane so that neither foot is touching inside the lane. To stop the count this player must have both feet touch the court outside of the lane. It's a violation for a player to step out of bounds in an attempt to avoid a three second violation. Allowance shall be made for a player who, having been in the restricted area for less than three seconds, dribbles in, or moves immediately to try for goal.

10. Result of a Violation: After a violation, the ball is awarded to the opponents for a throw-in from an out of bounds spot nearest the violation. This is especially true for a backcourt violation, where the ball may not necessarily be put in play at the division line, but, rather, is always put back in play at the spot nearest the violation.

11. Throw-in: A player inbounding the ball may step on, but not over the line. During a designated spot throw-in, the player inbounding the ball must keep one foot on, or over, the three-foot-wide designated spot. An inbounding player is allowed to jump or move one or both feet. A player inbounding the ball may move backward as far as the five second time limit, or space allows. If player moves outside the three-foot-wide designated spot, it is a throw-in violation, not traveling. In gymnasiums with limited space outside the sidelines, and end-lines, a defensive player may be asked to step back no more than three feet. A player inbounding the ball may "dribble" the ball on the out of bounds area prior to making a throw-in. After a goal, or awarded goal, the team not credited with the score shall make the throw-in from any point outside the end line. A team retains this "run the end-line" privilege if a timeout is called during the dead ball period after the goal. After a goal, or awarded goal, any player of the team may make a

direct throw-in or may pass the ball along the end-line to a teammate outside the boundary line.
The defender may not break the boundary plane during a throw-in until the ball has been released on a throw-in pass. If the defender breaks the boundary plane during a throw-in before the ball has been released on a throw-in pass, the defender's team will receive a team delay warning, or if the team has already been warned for one of the four delay situations, this action would result in a team technical foul. If the defender contacts the ball after breaking the boundary plane, it is a player technical foul, and a team delay warning will be recorded. If the defender breaks the boundary plane, and fouls the inbounding player, it is an intentional personal foul, and a team delay warning will be recorded. It is an intentional personal foul if the defender fouls the inbounding player, even without breaking the boundary plane, however, in this specific case, there is no delay of game warning because the defender did not break the boundary plane.
The inbounding player does not have a plane restriction, but has five seconds to release the ball, and it must come directly onto the court. The ball shall not enter the basket before it is touched by another player, nor may it become lodged between the backboard and ring or come to rest on the flange before it is touched by another player. Following throw-in violations, the ball is awarded to the opponents for a throw-in at the original throw-in spot. The ball can always be passed into the backcourt during a throw-in. This situation is not a backcourt violation.

12. Illegal Screen: A moving screen is not in and of itself a foul; illegal contact must occur for a foul to be called. If a blind screen is set on a stationary defender, the defender must be given one normal step to change direction and attempt to avoid contact. If a screen is set on a moving defender, the defender gets a minimum of one step, and a maximum of two steps, depending on the speed, and distance of the defender. Players setting screens must have both feet inbounds.

13. Illegal Use of Hands: It is legal use of hands to accidentally hit the hand of the opponent when it is in contact with the ball. This includes holding, dribbling, passing, or even during a shot attempt. Striking a ball handler, or a shooter, on that player's hand (in contact with the ball) that is incidental to an attempt to play the ball is not a foul.

14. Reaching: Reaching in is not a foul. There must be illegal contact to have a foul. The mere act of reaching in is, by itself, nothing. If illegal contact does occur, it's probably a holding foul, an illegal use of hands foul, or a hand check foul. When a player, in order to stop the clock, does not make a legitimate play for the ball, holds, pushes, or grabs away from the ball, or uses undue roughness, the foul is an

intentional foul.

15. Over the Back: Over the back is not a foul. There must be illegal contact to have a foul. A taller player may often be able to get a rebound over a shorter player, even if the shorter player has good rebounding position. If the shorter player is displaced, then a pushing foul must be called. A rebounding player, with an inside position, while boxing out, is not allowed to push back, or displace, an opponent, which is a pushing foul.

16. Legal Guarding Position: A defensive player does not have to remain stationary to take a charge. A defender may turn away, or duck, to absorb contact, provided the defender has already established legal guarding position, which is both feet on the playing court, and facing the opponent. The defender can always move backwards, or sideways, to maintain a legal guarding position, and may even have one or both feet off the floor when contact occurs. That player may legally rise vertically. If the defender is moving forward, then the contact is caused by the defender, which is a blocking foul. If the opponent with the ball is airborne, the defender must have obtained legal position before the opponent left the floor.

17. Incidental Contact: The mere fact that contact occurs does not constitute a foul. Incidental contact is contact with an opponent which is permitted and does not constitute a foul. Contact, which occurs unintentionally in an effort by an opponent to reach a loose ball or contact which may result when opponents are in equally favorable positions to perform normal defensive, or offensive moves, should not be considered illegal, even though the contact may be severe. Contact which does not hinder an opponent from participating in normal defensive, or offensive, movements should be considered incidental.

18. Time Out Request: The head coach may request, and be granted, a timeout if his, or her, player is holding, or dribbling, the ball; or during a dead ball period. A player saving the ball in the air can ask for, and be granted, a timeout even if that player is going out of bounds. The key is whether, or not, the player has control of the ball.

19. Free Throws: On free throws, there is a maximum of two offensive players, and four defensive players, in the six marked lane spaces. The defense must be in the first marked lane spaces, above the neutral zone marks, on all free throws. The offense must not occupy the first marked lane spaces, above the neutral zone marks. For free throws when there are no rebounders in the marked lane spaces, i.e., technical fouls, and intentional fouls, the nine non-shooters shall remain behind the free throw line extended, and behind the three-point arc.

Players in marked lane spaces must not move into the lane until the ball is released by the free throw

shooter. The shooter, and the players behind the three-point arc, must wait until the ball hits the ring, before entering the lane, or penetrating the three-point arc. On release of the ball by the free thrower, the defender boxing out the free thrower shall not cross the free throw line until the ball contacts the ring. In addition, the free throw shooter must cause the ball to enter the basket, or touch the ring, before the free throw ends. During a free throw, no opponent, including bench personnel, may distract the free thrower.

20. Jewelry: Players may not participate or even warm up while wearing jewelry. Bracelets, watches, necklaces, and other adornments are not permitted. Religious head coverings are permitted if they are not made of hard or abrasive materials. Earrings are **NOT** allowed, even if they are taped. Religious medals, or alert medals, are not considered jewelry. A religious medal must be taped and worn under the uniform. A medical alert medal must be taped and may be visible.

21. Player Uniform:

Rubber, cloth, or elastic bands, of any color, may be used to control hair. The rule now allows for bobby pins, flat clips, flat barrettes and other adornments to be worn in the hair as long as they don't present a safety hazard to the player, teammates, or opponents.

Revised 9/14/26 by Josh Wilson