

Personal Fouls vs. Unsportsmanlike Fouls

In NFHS rulebook, rule nine covers player conduct and tells officials what players cannot do during a football contest. Two major penalties described in that rule are personal fouls and unsportsmanlike conduct. Because ramifications attached to those fouls and enforcements vary, distinguishing one from the other is especially important.

Imagine a scenario in which it is team A's ball, second and 30 from its 20 yardline. During a run, A1 crosses the sideline at his 25 yardline. B2 tackles A1 well out of bounds and the linesman throws his flag. If the referee enforces B2's penalty as unsportsmanlike conduct, 15 yards will be walked off from team's A 25 yardline. Thus, it will be team A's ball, third and 10 from its 40 yardline.

What if, after the penalty is enforced, the back judge tells the referee that B2 was flagged earlier for celebrating after a touchdown. Since a player with two unsportsmanlike conduct fouls must be ejected (NFHS 9-5-1 Pen), the referee tells team B's coach his star player has to leave the game.

That foul being reported incorrectly obviously causes problems. If the linesman had properly stated a personal foul, B2 could have stayed in the game.

Unsportsmanlike acts are almost universally those that do not involve physical contact against an opponent. Taunting, excessive celebrating and disrespect directed at officials are examples of unsportsmanlike acts. Late hits, flagrant facemask grabs and roughing fouls are among those considered personal fouls.

Here's another example illustrating the problems caused by improper foul identification.

Play 1: A1 catches a pass and has a clear path to the end zone. At the team B five yardline and before he scores, A1 points at and taunts pursuing B2. The line judge throws his flag for taunting and reports A1's foul as (a) unsportsmanlike conduct, or (b) a personal foul. **Ruling 1:** In (a), that is a live-ball foul penalized as a dead-ball foul. Team A keeps the score and the penalty is enforced on the try (NFHS). In (b), the personal foul is a live-ball foul during a run. The penalty is enforced from the spot of the foul (team B's five yardline). It would be team A's ball, first and 10 from team B's 20 yardline and the score would not count. Obviously, a big difference based on how that infraction is reported. Unsportsmanlike conduct is the correct call on that play.

Matters can be further complicated when other fouls are involved.

Play 2: Team A has the ball, third and nine from its 20 yardline. During a run for no gain, team A only has six men on the line. During the run, B2 punches A1. B2's disqualification foul is reported as (a) a personal foul, or (b) unsportsmanlike conduct. **Ruling 2:** In (a), the fouls offset and the down is repeated because there is a live-ball foul by each team. In (b), since unsportsmanlike conduct is enforced as a dead-ball foul, each foul is enforced in its order of occurrence. Five yards are walked off against team A, then 15

yards are walked off in the other direction.

Because unsportsmanlike conduct was erroneously reported, team A incorrectly got additional yards and a first down. Even though B2's act was unsportsmanlike, it is a personal foul because there was illegal contact.

Two unsportsmanlike conduct fouls by the same player require ejection. The same is not true for a player guilty of two personal fouls.

Play 3: Unsportsmanlike conduct is called for the second time on (a) A1, a player in the game; (b) B1, who is in the team area; (c) team A's head coach, or (d) a team trainer. **Ruling 3:** Players in (a) and (b) are ejected from the game. In (c) and (d), the offenders are ejected if the NFHS rules are being used. An ejected NFHS coach must leave the stadium area and cannot interact in any way with his team. Ejected players can remain in their team area.

Verbally jamming offensive signals by the defense is a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty in NFHS (9-5-1d).

For intentionally contacting an official. NFHS considers that a personal foul (9-4-6). Rule calls for a 15-yard penalty and disqualification for the guilty player, coach or others subject to the rules.

To help distinguish the two fouls, here are general statements about personal fouls and unsportsmanlike conduct.

- In NFHS, unsportsmanlike conduct penalties are 15 yards. The exception is failure to wear proper equipment during a down (1-5-6), which is a five-yard penalty.
- All personal fouls are 15-yard penalties. A personal foul can be a live- or dead-ball foul. In NCAA only, personal fouls by team B give team A an automatic first down (9-1-2 fouls).
- Some personal fouls require player ejection (e.g., fighting and flagrant personal fouls).
- Unsportsmanlike conduct is enforced as a dead-ball foul. A flagrant unsportsmanlike conduct foul requires player ejection.
- It is considered a fighting act if a player swings at an opponent and misses or attempts to kick an opponent and misses (NFHS 2-11). Those are personal fouls even though no contact was made. The guilty player is disqualified.
- In NFHS, hurdling (9-4-2d), positioning oneself on a teammate to gain an advantage (9-4-2e) and hiding the ball under a jersey (9-4-2k) are personal fouls.