

40 Second Play Clock Mechanics

The play clock is used to ensure that each team be given a standardized, consistent interval between plays and from game to game. A visible play clock may or may not be available, but the timing involved will stay the same.

Both a 40 second and a 25 second play clock are required with the new NFHS rule change. Unless the game is stopped for administrative reasons (change of possession, penalty, injury, clock error, etc.) the offensive team has 40 seconds to snap the ball after the previous play ends. After administrative stoppages, a 25 second play clock is used. With a 40 second play clock, the ball is ready for play (RFP) when the official spots the ball and steps away to his/her position.

As this is a new rule for players, coaches, officials, chain crew, and timers, it is important that as officials we are all on the same page. This includes covering this new mechanic in meetings so everyone understands how it will work, reviewing this in the pregame so the entire crew is on the same page as far as how we handle it, discussing it with the Head Coach when we meet with him/ her prior to the game, and meeting with the game clock operator and the person operating the play clock (when it is displayed on the field) so that everyone is knowledgeable about the rule.

Mechanics

Responsibility—the 40 second play clock is maintained by the Back Judge in a 5-person crew and by the Referee in a 3 or 4-person crew.

Starting the Play Clock—The play clock starts when the previous play ends and the covering officials gives a signal indicating that the ball has become dead. Using signal S7 (Dead Ball foul), the covering official will raise one arm for at least two seconds to signify the play has ended and the 40 second play clock is to be started. The Back Judge or Referee should start the play clock a second or two after the covering official has signaled the play ended.

The dead ball signal is only used when there is no other clock signal. If the play is ruled out of bounds or a first down is gained inbounds, the covering official will signal to stop the game clock. On an incomplete pass the covering officials will only signal incomplete pass. **These signals will also serve to start the 40 second play clock.**

Ready for Play Whistle—this signal is not used when the 40 second clock is running. Once the ball is spotted the offense can snap the ball. However, if the play clock is stopped for an Administrative reason, we use the 25 second play clock and we will have the Ready for Play whistle (“Chopping It In”).

Reset—If the play clock is interrupted, it will usually be reset to 25 seconds. The signal is one arm with an open palm pumped into the air—“push the sky.” If the 40 second play clock needs to be reset then two arms pumped into the air will be used—“raise the roof”.

Countdown—in lieu of a visible play clock, the following signaling technique will be used for the benefit of coaches and players for both a 40 second and 25 second play clock. Our normal signaling mechanics shall be used to tell everyone that there is 5 seconds or less remaining on the play clock. In a five man crew the Back Judge will raise his hand. In a three or four-person crew the Referee will verbally count down the last five seconds so the quarterback can hear it.

Chain Crew—If the box is not in place when the snap is imminent, the Head Linesman will drop a bean bag to indicate the placement of the box. Under no circumstances will the play clock be reset to 25 seconds because of a slow chain crew. *This will be a major change for referees as we’ve been trained since Day One to wait till the chains area set prior to chopping it in—now we briefly stop the game clock, signal first down, and then start the game clock again (without a whistle) regardless of if the chains are in position or not.*

First down inbounds—When a first down is gained and the play ends inbounds, the clock stops to award the new series but the 40 second play clock starts when the ball becomes dead (this is not an administrative stoppage). Although the ball normally can be snapped as soon as it is spotted, in this special case, it cannot be snapped until the game clock is restarted. The umpire may need to stand over the ball to prevent a snap until the referee signals the game clock to start.

Clock Error—If the game clock operator does not or is slow to respond, the Referee may blow his whistle to get the clock operator’s attention. Such a whistle does not reset the play clock. If the clock operator still doesn’t respond, the Referee will signal timeout and reset the play clock to 25 seconds.

Here are some examples beginning with a common scenario. Table 1 shows more scenarios.

EXAMPLE 1: A32 runs for a one-yard gain and is tackled inbounds (a) short of, or (b) beyond the line-to-gain.

RULING: In either case, a 40-second play clock is started immediately when the ball is declared dead. In (a), the game clock continues to run. The referee does not give a ready signal or any other clock signal. In (b), the game clock stops. The referee signals “first down,” the ball is spotted and the referee then signals to start the game clock. The referee does not wait for the chains to be set before starting the clock.

On a fourth-down play that results in a change of possession, the clock is stopped to award Team B a first down, the game clock will stop, and the referee will blow his whistle and signal ready-for-play for a 25-second play clock.

EXAMPLE 2: A11 throws an incomplete pass. **RULING:** A 40-second play clock is started immediately when the ball is declared dead and the game clock stops. The game clock will start on the snap and there is no overt referee signal.

EXAMPLE 3: A24 runs out of bounds (a) short of, or (b) beyond the line-to-gain. **RULING:** In both cases, a 40-second play clock is started immediately when the ball is declared dead and the game clock stops. The game clock will start on the snap and there is no overt referee signal. In (b), the referee signals a first down.

As illustrated in the preceding three examples, if a play ends beyond the line-to-gain without a foul, a 40-second play clock is used. The game clock is still stopped for the ball to be spotted, but that is not considered an administrative stoppage.

The following is a prime example of an administrative stoppage.

EXAMPLE 4: A11 throws an incomplete pass. A79 is flagged for holding. **RULING:** The clock stops for the incomplete pass. After the penalty is administered, the ready-for-play is blown and a 25-second play clock is started. The game clock starts on the snap.

EXAMPLE 5: During a down that ends inbounds, B55’s helmet comes off without a helmet foul by Team A. B55 immediately picks up his helmet, puts it on and continues to chase the ball carrier. **RULING:** An illegal participation foul by B55 for continuing to participate after losing his helmet. The clock stops at the end of the down and B55 must leave the game for the next down. After the penalty is enforced, the play clock is set at 25 seconds and both clocks start on the referee’s whistle and wind the clock signal.

EXAMPLE 6: Team B trails by three points with 40 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter and the game clock is running. A22 runs and is tackled inbounds short of a first down, but (a) A63’s, or (b) B44’s helmet comes completely off during the play. The game clock reads 0:33. **RULING:** In either case, the play clock will be set at 25 seconds and the game clock is started on the ready. Team A must snap the ball to avoid a delay of game foul.

EXAMPLE 7: Second and 14 at the A-25. A33 gains six yards and is tackled inbounds. The Line Judge mistakes the back stake for the front stake and erroneously stops the clock. **RULING:** Although a 40-second play clock will start as soon as the ball is dead, the Referee will handle this as an administrative stoppage. As soon as the error is detected, the play clock will be set at 25 seconds and the game clock is started.

EXAMPLE 8: During the down B77 is injured. A44 is tackled inbounds. When the clock is stopped for the injury, it reads 0:58 in the fourth quarter. **RULING:** The play clock is set to 25 seconds and both clocks are started on the ready.

EXAMPLE 9: With the game clock running, Team A allows the play clock to run down. **RULING:** Team B may accept or decline a five-yard penalty for delay of game. In either case, the play clock will be set at 25 seconds. If the penalty is accepted, the game clock starts on the snap. If the penalty is declined, the game clock starts on the ready.

EXAMPLE 10: The 40 second play clock is started after a running play ends inbounds. There is a delay in getting a ball to the Umpire for spotting for the next play. **RULING:** If the play clock reads 25 seconds or less before the ball can be spotted, the Referee will declare an official's timeout and signal with one "pump" to reset the clock to 25 seconds. The Referee will then signal to start the play clock and the game clock *when the ball is spotted*.

EXAMPLE 11: 3rd and 2½, A 45 fumbles near the line to gain. The officials cannot determine who recovered the fumble: the LJ stops the game clock to locate the ball. A 45 is found in possession of the ball (a) short of the line to gain or (b) past the line to gain. **RULING:** The 40 second clock starts when the ball is declared dead. In (a) the Referee will signal the game clock to start. In (b) the game clock will start on the Referee's RFP. Any delay in spotting the ball causing the play clock to read 25 second or less will result in the Referee declaring an official's timeout and signal with one "pump" to reset the play clock to 25 seconds. The referee will then signal to start the play clock and the game clock.

Play Clock Timing Chart

Administrative issues are situations such as the chains getting tangled up or broken, dry ball not brought in time, etc. This stoppage is not intended to allow for additional time needed to break up scraps between players. Statements like “Play clock is running” can be used as an aide to assist in getting players back to huddle.

Event *	Play Clock Starts at	Game Clock Starts on	Covering Official's Signal	Referee's Signal
Dead ball inbounds	40	Running	S7	None
Dead ball out of bounds	40	Snap	S3	None
Incomplete pass	40	Snap	S10	None
Team A awarded 1st down	40	Signal	S3	Wind
Penalty administration	25	Ready	S3	Wind
Charged team timeout	25	Snap	S3	Chop
Injury/Helmet off/ Player in need of equipment repair	25	Ready	S3	Wind
Measurement	25	Ready	S3	Wind
Double Change of possession- Team A snaps	40	Ready	S7	Wind
Change of possession- Team B snaps	25	Snap	S3	Chop
Touchdown	25	N/A	S5	Chop
Try, FG, Safety	25	Varies**	Varies**	Chop
Start of each period	25	Snap	N/A	Chop
Legal kick	25	Snap	S3	Chop
Start of an overtime period	25	N/A	N/A	Chop
Other administrative stoppage ***	25	Ready	S3	Wind

* If event does not occur in conjunction with any other event that stops the clock.

** The game clock will start on the free kick by rule.

*** Includes inadvertent whistle and period extension.

S3 is stop the clock, S7 is “dead ball - start play clock,” S10 is incomplete pass.