

Missoula Youth Football — MHSA Flag Football Rules FAQ

Coach Reference Guide | Based on the MHSA Flag Football Rules Book, 2026 Edition

A NOTE ON THIS SEASON'S RULES

This season MYF is moving to full MHSA Girls Flag Football rules as written in the 2026 rulebook. Our goal is to give our players a consistent experience with the rules they will play under at the high school level and to make it easier for coaches, officials, and families to all be on the same page. Several things will be different from how we played last year. Where something was done differently last year, the MHSA rule now applies. The most important changes are noted throughout this document.

The full 2026 MHSA rulebook is available from the Montana High School Association and will be provided to all coaches. Any questions not covered here will be addressed at the coaches' meeting.

CHANGES FROM LAST SEASON

We played with a 7-yard rush rule last year. Are we still doing that?

No. Under MHSA rules, the defense lines up at their scrimmage line, which is 2 yards from the ball (the neutral zone). There is no 7-yard rush rule and no designated rusher. Any defender may rush the passer from the line. The tradeoff is that the offense now has screen blockers, which was not permitted last year, so the two changes balance each other out.

We required snaps between the center's legs last year. Is that still the case?

No. MHSA only requires a quick, continuous backward motion for the snap. Side snaps, shotgun snaps, or any other method that meets that standard are all legal. See the Snapping the Ball section below for full details.

We did not allow the QB to run last year. Has that changed?

Yes. Under MHSA rules, the quarterback can run at any time. There is no restriction on any player carrying the ball once the snap is live.

We did not allow backward passes or laterals last year. Has that changed?

Yes. MHSA permits backward passes and laterals at any time. A backward pass or fumble that hits the ground is dead at that spot, so there is risk involved in using them — but they are legal.

Does the ball always go the same direction, or do teams go up and down the field?

Teams go up and down the field. Under MHSA rules, each team starts their possession from their own 14-yard line and drives toward the opposite end zone. Teams change the direction they defend at halftime. This is consistent with standard football.

Are there any requirements about how many receivers must be on the line of scrimmage?

No. Under MHSA rules, the center (snapper) is the only offensive player required to be on the line of scrimmage at the snap. No other players are required to be on the line, which gives offenses significant flexibility in how they align.

What are the extra point options this year?

MYF is adopting the full MHSA PAT structure to stay consistent with the rulebook. After a touchdown, the offense has three choices:

- **1 point** — snap from the 3-yard line
- **2 points** — snap from the 10-yard line
- **3 points** — snap from the 15-yard line

The 3-point option is new this year. The referee will ask the coach or captain which option they are choosing before each Try.

FIELD DIMENSIONS

What does the field look like?

The MHSA flag football field is 40 yards wide and 80 yards long. There are 10-yard end zones at each end, making the playing field between the goal lines 60 yards. Zone-to-gain markers are located at the 20-yard and 40-yard lines on each side of midfield, dividing the field of play into three 20-yard zones. The field also has a marked 14-yard line (the starting position for each possession), a 10-yard line, and a 3-yard line near each end zone. The team box runs along the sideline, 2 yards off the field, between the 20-yard lines. (Rule 1, Section 2)

If field dimensions must be adjusted due to facility limitations, the width may be reduced to no less than 30 yards wide, but the end zones must always remain 10 yards deep.

THE ZONE-TO-GAIN SYSTEM

Are the zone-to-gain lines every 20 yards?

Yes. The three zones between the goal lines are each 20 yards deep, marked at the 20-yard and 40-yard lines. To earn a new series of four downs, Team A must advance the ball so that it crosses into the next zone. (Rule 5, Section 1, Article 2)

Where does the offense start each possession? Is it 6 yards to the first zone marker?

Yes. Unless moved by penalty, each possession begins with the ball snapped from the 14-yard line. The first zone-to-gain marker is the 20-yard line, so the offense needs to advance 6 yards to earn a new series. After a safety or a score, the receiving team also starts from their own 14-yard line. (Rule 3, Section 1, Article 2)

What happens when the offense fails to reach the next zone on fourth down?

The defense takes possession at the dead-ball spot — wherever the ball was when the final down ended. There is no bonus yardage awarded to the defense. The defense then starts a new series of four downs from that spot. (Rule 5, Section 1, Articles 3–4)

SNAPPING THE BALL

Does the snap have to go between the center's legs?

No. The rulebook only requires that the snap be “a quick and continuous backward motion.” There is no requirement that the ball pass between the center's legs. Shotgun snaps, side snaps, or any other method that meets the quick continuous motion standard are all legal. (Rule 7, Section 2, Article 3)

Can the quarterback line up directly under center?

No. The player receiving the snap must be at least 2 yards behind the line of scrimmage at the time of the snap. Lining up under center is not permitted. (Rule 7, Section 3, Article 4)

DEFENSE AND THE NEUTRAL ZONE

How far back must the defense line up before the snap?

The neutral zone extends 2 yards from the ball toward the defense. Team B's scrimmage line is defined as 2 yards from the forward point of the ball. No defensive player may be in that neutral zone when the ball is snapped. The host school is responsible for providing two ball spotters, always placed 2 yards apart, to mark the neutral zone. (Rule 2, Sections 15 and 20)

Are there rules about blitzing or rushing the passer?

The rulebook does not define or regulate blitzing. There is no rule limiting how many defenders may rush the passer, and no rule requiring a designated rusher. The only defensive requirement is that all players must be behind their scrimmage line (2 yards from the ball) when the ball is snapped.

RUNNING THE BALL

Can the quarterback run the ball?

Yes. There is no rule prohibiting the quarterback — or any other player — from running the ball. Once the snap is live, any player may carry the ball. The only restriction specific to the passer is that a forward pass cannot be thrown once the passer's feet cross the line of scrimmage.

BLOCKING AND SCREENING — NO PHYSICAL CONTACT

Can offensive players block or screen for a runner or passer?

Yes, but all screen blocking must take place without physical contact. This is one of the most important rules in flag football and applies everywhere on the field.

When screen blocking, the blocker's hands and arms must be kept at their sides or behind their back at all times. Any use of the hands, arms, elbows, legs, or body to initiate contact is illegal, regardless of where it occurs on the field. A blocker may use a hand or arm only to break their own fall or maintain their balance. The blocker must remain on their feet before, during, and after the screen. (Rule 9, Section 3, Article 3) Penalty: Personal Foul, Illegal Contact — 10 yards.

Is there a difference between blocking behind the line of scrimmage and blocking downfield?

Yes, and this is an important distinction:

- **Behind the line of scrimmage:** Teammates of the runner or passer may screen block with motion, as long as there is no intention of initiating contact.
- **Beyond the line of scrimmage:** Teammates of the runner may NOT be in motion at the time of the screen. A blocker who is moving when they make contact with a defender downfield has committed a foul even if they never used their hands.

In both cases, the no-contact rule applies. Teammates may also not use interlocked interference — they cannot grasp or encircle one another in any manner to create a wall. (Rule 9, Section 3, Article 5) Penalty: Personal Foul, Interlocked Interference — 10 yards.

What are defenders allowed to do when they encounter a screen block?

Defenders must go around a screen block. They may not use their arms or hands as a wedge to displace a blocker. A defender may use their arms or hands only to break their own fall or retain their balance. (Rule 9, Section 3, Article 6)

What about contact near the passer?

Defenders must make a definite effort to go for the flags and avoid charging into the passer after it is clear the ball has been thrown. No defensive player may contact a passer who is

standing still or fading back — the passer is considered out of the play after releasing the ball. Any attempt to play the ball rather than the flags when rushing the passer will result in a penalty. (Rule 9, Section 3, Article 2) Penalty: Roughing the Passer — 10 yards and automatic first down.

Can a ball-carrier use a stiff arm?

No. The runner may not contact an opponent with an extended hand or arm. Using a stiff arm to ward off a defender attempting to pull a flag is a personal foul. (Rule 9, Section 4, Article 3) Penalty: Personal Foul, Illegal Contact — 10 yards.

Can a runner flag guard?

No. The ball-carrier may not use their hands, arms, or the ball to cause contact between themselves and an opponent in a way that denies the opponent the opportunity to pull the flag. Flag guarding includes placing or swinging the hand or arm over the flag belt, placing the ball over the flag belt, or lowering the shoulders in a way that covers the flag. (Rule 9, Section 4, Article 2) Penalty: Flag Guarding — 10 yards.

PUNTING

Do teams punt, and is it a live return or a dead ball?

Punting is allowed and the return is live — there is no fair catch in MHSA flag football.

Before the referee marks the ball ready for play, the referee must ask the offensive captain whether they want to punt. The captain may declare a punt on any down, not just fourth down. Once declared, the team must punt — they cannot change their mind. Quick punts (punting without the declaration) are illegal. (Rule 6, Section 1, Articles 1–2) Penalty: Illegal Kick — 10 yards.

Neither team may cross the line of scrimmage until the ball is actually punted. (Rule 6, Section 1, Article 3)

The MHSA rulebook explicitly states: “Players shall ignore any signals given by K or R. The ball remains live.” (Rule 6, Section 2) There is no fair catch. The receiving team can advance any punt that has not yet touched the ground.

Once a punt hits the ground, it is dead. If the punt crosses the kicking team’s scrimmage line, touches any player from either team, and then hits the ground, the ball is dead at that spot and belongs to the receiving team. If a punt goes out of bounds or comes to rest untouched with no player attempting to secure it, it is also dead at that spot. A punt that breaks the plane of the receiving team’s goal line is a touchback — the receiving team starts at their own 14-yard line. (Rule 6, Section 1, Articles 6–9)

GAME TIMING

How long is a game?

Games are four periods of 10 minutes each. There is a 1-minute break between the 1st and 2nd quarters and between the 3rd and 4th quarters, and a 5-minute halftime. (Rule 3, Section 2, Article 1)

Does the clock run continuously?

During the first 18 minutes of each half, the clock runs continuously. It stops only for team time-outs, official's time-outs, the end of the 1st and 3rd quarters, and after each score (including the extra point Try). The clock restarts on the snap of the next play.

Important 2026 rule change: The clock now stops after ALL scores and during the Try for extra points. It resumes on the snap of the next possession. (2026 Montana Rule Changes, p. 2)

What happens in the final 2 minutes of each half?

During the final 2 minutes of the 2nd and 4th periods, the clock also stops for incomplete passes, out-of-bounds plays, safeties, first downs, touchdowns, penalties and administration, official's time-outs, touchbacks, and when a new series is awarded. The back judge announces remaining time to both captains after every play during the final 2 minutes. (Rule 3, Section 2, Article 7)

Is there a 2-minute warning?

Yes. Approximately 2 minutes before the end of the 2nd and 4th periods, the referee stops the clock and gives both captains a mandatory 1-minute time-out. (Rule 3, Section 2, Article 6)

How much time does the offense have to snap the ball?

The offense has 25 seconds to snap the ball after it is declared ready for play. (Rule 3, Section 5, Delay of Game)

Penalty: Delay of Game — 5 yards from the succeeding spot.

How many time-outs does each team get?

Each team is entitled to 3 charged time-outs per half, each 1 minute long. (Rule 3, Section 4, Articles 3-4)

Is there a mercy rule?

Yes. If a team leads by 28 or more points at any point in the game, the clock will run continuously for the remainder of the game. Additionally, if a team is 19 or more points ahead when the referee announces the 2-minute warning in the 4th period, the game ends at that point. (Rule 3, Section 2, Article 1; Rule 8, Section 2)

All rules cited from the MHSA Flag Football Rules Book, 2026 Edition. Coaches are encouraged to review the full rulebook for complete rule language. Copies are available from the Montana High School Association.