

FORWARD PROGRESS

By Vic Winnek

Forward progress appears simple in concept – the forward most point of the ball when the play is declared dead. This simple concept is one of the most inconsistently applied and misunderstood rules of the game. “*Forward progress*”, one of the most significantly evolved rules, was first addressed in 1906 later edited in 1932, 1973 and again in 1988 providing the current definition.

The forward progress rules are utilized on most every play. However, officials frequently misapply them. The reason officials tend to misjudge this call is because they do not use the ball as their reference point. It is not the position of the runner’s foot or the runner’s knee. Rather, it is the position of the forward most point of the ball when the play becomes dead by rule. It is this dead ball spot that determines forward progress.

Under the college rules: *Forward progress is a term indicating the end of advancement by the runner or airborne pass receiver of either team and applies to the position of the ball when it became dead by rule.* (NCAA Rule 2-8-2). Hence, the reference point is the ball. Officials must note the position of the ball when the runner or airborne receiver is no longer moving forward.

Under the high school rules: *Forward progress is the end of advancement of a runner toward the opponent’s goal and determines the dead ball spot. When an airborne player makes a catch, forward progress is the furthest point of advancement after he possesses the ball if contacted by a defender.* (Federation Rule 2-15-1, 2). Again, the reference point is the position of the ball when the runner is no longer moving forward toward his opponent’s goal line. The Federation rule reference the “dead ball spot” which implies the forward most point of the ball. (2-40-3).

The rule is in part, objective – not open to interpretation. The official makes an observation and marks the spot at the location determined by the exact instant the ball becomes dead by rule. *You see it and go to the spot.* Mark the forward tip of the ball if the ball was carried with the length axis of the ball parallel to the sideline. Otherwise mark the forward most part of the ball.

Application of the forward progress rules also requires a subjective approach. This is when officials are called upon to use their judgment and make a decision that the ball carrier is no longer advancing toward his opponent’s goal line. Is the runner moving forward, sideways, or backward? If the runner’s momentum is no longer going forward his progress has stopped. If the runner’s movement is solely sideways toward the sideline his forward progress has stopped.

Although the rule no longer uses the language: *in the grasp of an opponent*”; philosophically it is implied through tradition. Both high school and college rules deem the ball dead and forward progress stopped when the ball carrier is “held so his (forward advancing) progress is stopped” (Federation Rule 4-2-2-a; NCAA Rule 4-1-3-a). NCAA Rule 4-1-3-a states that the ball becomes dead “*when the runner is so held that his forward progress is stopped.*” Officials must determine if the opponent of the runner has sufficiently held or grasped the runner so as to have stopped his forward movement. This action is what kills the play not the whistle. A quick whistle can get an official into trouble, but too much of delayed whistle can also cause problems. A quick whistle may lead to an inadvertent whistle. A slow whistle may allow for the ball to become loose or a player to become injured, etc. Therefore, officials must know when the forward movement has stopped.

A runner who is running sideways and is grasped or held by an opponent is no longer advancing the ball forward. Likewise, a ball carrier that is being pushed backward by an opponent is no longer advancing the ball forward and by rule the ball is dead. In situations where a runner is hit, knocked backward but not held in the opponent’s grasp, the runner may still advance the ball

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forward. The reason forward progress is not stopped is because the runner was not grasped. An airborne receiver who catches the ball and then is driven backward by an opponent and the ball then declared dead will be awarded the forward progress spot at the place where he received the pass. When a runner steps out of bounds the forward progress spot is where the ball was when the runner stepped out of bounds. On plays where the runner/airborne receiver stretched out the ball (before being downed) at the sideline, the forward progress spot is the foremost point of the ball where it intersects the sideline.

On every play officials must know when the ball becomes dead. For forward progress purposes the ball becomes dead when: the runner is out of bounds; the runner is held so his forward progress is stopped; when any part of the runner's body other than his hand or foot touches the ground; inadvertent whistle or when the runner's helmet comes off. Additionally, under the NCAA rules when the airborne pass receiver is so held and subsequently carried and prevented from returning to the ground.

Marking Forward Progress:

Forward progress is not the point where the runner's knee first touches the ground or where the runner's foot goes out of bounds. The reference point is the BALL (usually carried at the shoulder/chest). Mark forward progress by "squaring up" from the sideline and align your forward foot with the forward most part of the ball. Using common sense, not to give an advantage to a team, try to start a new series of downs (after a change of possession) on a yard line. This makes it easier to see the line to gain, measure and march off penalties. Contrary to some officials' practices, this does not mean you always mark the ball on a yard line for each down. Mark progress where the ball lies.

There are times when it is extremely difficult to determine with precision where the dead ball spot is (e.g. run plays up the middle into a pile). In this instance, the officials must watch the runner. See where the ball is being carried (i.e. tucked in one arm at his rib cage, held with both hands in front chest high, etc.) Remember, the ball is not carried at the knees or thigh or at the waist level. Use the runner's chest and shoulders as a reference point when you have lost sight of the ball and it is not loose. Mark forward progress by moving parallel to the runner then square up, pinch in as necessary. Indicate the spot by standing with both feet together, using your forward most foot as the mark.

Cross-Field Mechanics:

Cross-field mechanics are used by the flanks (*and deep sides in 7 man mechanics*). This assures the forward progress spot is correct. The official on the far side or the "off official" usually has a good view of the end of the run. The off official (across the field) runs parallel to the play on his sideline and squares up to mark progress. The near official does the same, looking across the field to make sure he is aligned with the cross-field official marking the spot. If the near official has the runner down or out of bounds and has a more accurate spot, the off official shall yield to the near official's progress spot. If the near official is blocked out of a play or knocked down, the off official will have the spot. Good communication in the pre-game and during the game with respect to cross-field mechanics is vital for success.

To properly rule on forward progress, discuss it during the pre-game. Communicate with fellow officials about having the spot on each play. Always see the ball and use the forward most point as your reference. Know when the runner's advancement is stopped and whether it was due to an opponent's grasp, or when the runner/airborne receiver goes out of bounds, etc. If you don't see the ball on a dive play, watch the runner's shoulders. If you don't see the ball on a long run or pass play, look to the cross-field official. Be consistent with your forward progress spots!