

SIDELINE WARNING

By Vic Winnek

The sideline warning is one of the most useful yet under utilized tools available to officials. It was enacted to reduce sideline congestion, keep coaches and squad members off the field and provide a safe environment for officials, chain crew, coaches and players. It helps to prevent sideline collisions; unfair coaching advantages; and allows a flank official to work his position without distraction or interference. All of this is accomplished without penalizing a team for their first offense in Federation and second offense in NCAA.

The game of football is regulated by lines and boundaries: the line to gain, sidelines, end lines, goal lines, etc. The rules define the lines and boundaries and dictate the consequence for breaching and the reward for achieving these lines. For example, when a player steps on the sideline he is deemed out of bounds, or when the ball touches beyond the end line, it is either a safety or touchback, or when a runner breaks the plane of his opponent's goal line, he is awarded a score. Boundaries along the sideline also regulate non-players.

Coaches, attendants, substitutes, and squad members are governed by specific rules (Federation 1-2-3-c, e; 9-8-1-i, k; 9-8-3; NCAA 9-1-4; 9-1-5; 9-2-1-b) that prohibit them from leaving their designated areas; the team box/area and coaches box/area.

Historically there have been problems with coaches, team members and spectators illegally being on the field or congregating along the sideline. In the early 1880's the perimeter of the field was roped off to keep people back from the side and end lines. As early as 1892 the Rules Committee charged the umpire with the duty of giving sideline warnings to anyone inside the ropes. Too often coaches and substitutes would step onto the field or sideline during play and coach. In 1900 the Rules Committee did away with the sideline warning and required the violator to be "*removed from the neighborhood of the field...*" and a 10-yard penalty was assessed. Problems along the sideline force the Committee to only allow 5 men to walk along the sideline; later reducing the number to 3, then 1; and from 1914 to 1949 all coaches and team members were required to remain seated on a bench away from the sideline. Violators would be warned and or ejected. Rules unfortunately disappear because many times players and officials disregard them. Let's not disregard the sideline warning.

In 1957 the Committee mandated coaches, substitutes and authorized attendants to remain within the team area (between the 35-yard lines). In 1975 the team area was expanded to "*between the 30-yard lines*"; and in 1986 it was extended to "*between the 25-yard lines*". The Federation Rules Committee followed suit.

Under Federation Rules: "No coach, substitute, trainer or team attendant shall...: (Be) on the field except as a substitute or replaced player" (Federation 9-8-i). This is considered unsportsmanlike conduct and penalized 15 yards. Further, Federation rules: 9-8-3 and 9-8-1-k grant officials the authority to give a sideline warning when coaching staffs and squad members are outside the team box. Federation rule 9-8-3 states "*A non-player shall not be outside his team box unless to become a player or to return as a replaced player. A maximum of three (3) coaches may be in the coaches' area*" While Federation rule 9-8-1-i prohibits coach, substitute, trainer or team attendants from *being outside their team box*. The penalty for: first offense is a warning; each subsequent offense is a 15-yard dead ball unsportsmanlike conduct foul.

The NCAA rule is more succinct and offers the procedure for enforcement. NCAA rule 9-1-5-a states: "*While the ball is in play, coaches, substitutes and authorized attendants in the team area may not be between the sideline and the coaching line*". NCAA rule 9-1-5-b offers a 5-step procedure: *The procedure for enforcement of Rule 9-1-5-1 is as follows:*

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1. *Any game official may stop the clock to give a sideline warning.*
2. *The head coach is informed by the game official that he is receiving a first or second warning because the area between the sideline and coaching line has been violated by coaches, players, or persons authorized to be in the team area.*
3. *Each official will record the time and period of each warning.*
4. *After the second warning, a game official will notify the head coach that he has had two warnings and that the next infraction will result in a 5-yard penalty.*
5. *After a 5-yard penalty, a game official will notify the head coach that he has had two warnings and a 5-yard penalty, and will receive a 15-yard penalty for the next infraction (and all subsequent infractions).*

Regardless of the level, coaches, substitutes and authorized attendants are not to be on the field during play or during dead ball intervals when there is not a timeout. Non-team individuals (i.e. cheerleaders, spectators, photographers, statisticians, etc.) are not to be on or along the sideline or end line under any circumstances. Only coaches may be in the Coaches' Box or Coaching Area.

Flank officials need to enforce these rules. One's people skills, field presence and ability to communicate will be the best resources for controlling the sidelines. The rules allow officials to give a sideline warning before penalizing a team yardage. This is akin to a traffic cop pulling over a speeder and giving him a warning rather than a ticket. Too often officials are afraid to give the warning or have allowed the sideline to get out of hand or threaten to penalize a team for sideline violations. When this happens it is too late, sideline control is lost.

Be courteous to the team, yet firm. Before the start of the game as for a "Get Back Coach" and explain to him the coaching area, team area and your expectations. If the sideline rules are violated, be polite and verbally correct the problem. If it happens again, give the sideline warning. Follow proper mechanics.

The California Football Officials Association offers the following mechanic:

1. *Flank official calls timeout and reports to the referee that he is giving a sideline warning for a violation of the team box rule. (Note time and quarter of warning on game card).*
2. *Warning can be given anytime during the game, whether the clock is running out or not. Good judgment will dictate when the warning is to be given. Don't break a team's momentum, when line of scrimmage is out of the team box area, etc.*
3. *Referee gives signal #15 in the center of the field facing the press box and points to the offending team's sideline, while the official on that sideline, personally notifies the head coach that he is getting (a warning, and subsequent infractions will result in a penalty). The official on the opposite side of the field will notify that head coach that the warning (has been) given...*

Some college conferences have the official giving the warning throw his penalty flag before signaling timeout. The flag calls attention to the fact that there has been a rules infraction. It gives teeth to the warning. It is similar to the traffic cop who pulls over the speeder using his lights and siren – everyone's attention is drawn to the officer's action. Likewise, by throwing a flag, the entire stadium knows something has happened and will look to the referee's signal. You may want to contemplate this mechanic.

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Sideline control is a point of emphasis in both the college and high school rules. As with enforcement of all rules, consistency within the game is vital. If officials do not maintain control of the sidelines during the first quarter of a game, they won't be able to during the fourth quarter. To be consistent the sideline warning must be given the first time the rule is violated. To wait until late in the game to begin enforcing the rule is improper. Officials must be consistent in enforcing the sideline rules from week to week and from crew to crew as well. If one week a crew does not enforce the rules and then the next another crew does, we as officials are being inconsistent and that is a detriment to the game and to officiating.