

## NFHS Football Rule 4: Ball in Play, Dead Ball, Out of Bounds.

### Key Sections of NFHS Rule 4

#### ARTICLE 1: BALL IN PLAY (LIVE BALL)

A **live ball** is a ball that is legally in play. A down starts with a live ball.

- **A live ball is created by:**

1. A **free kick** (kickoff) breaking the plane of R's free-kick line.
  2. A **snap** on a scrimmage down.
  3. A **legal touch** of a punt by the receiving team (K can no longer down the ball).
- The ball remains live until it is declared **dead** by rule.

#### ARTICLE 2: DEAD BALL

A **dead ball** is a ball that is not in play. A down ends with a dead ball. A dead ball cannot be advanced, and a new down begins when the ball is put in play again.

#### **A live ball becomes a dead ball when:**

##### **a) It goes out of bounds.**

- The entire ball must cross the boundary line.

##### **b) Any part of the runner, other than their hand or foot, touches the ground.**

- This is the primary definition of a runner being "down." A player does not need to be "tackled" by an opponent; if they slip and fall, they are down.
- **Exception:** The runner is **not** down if they fall and land on another player, and their body (knee, elbow, etc.) does not touch the ground.
- **The Hand/Foot Exception:** Only the hand(s) or foot/feet can touch the ground without the runner being declared down. A runner can use their hand to steady themselves and continue running.

##### **c) A forward pass (legal or illegal) is incomplete.**

- The ball hits the ground before being caught.

**d) A runner has a forward progress spot reached and then is carried or driven backward by an opponent.**

- The ball is dead at the spot of the runner's most forward advance.

**e) A legal kick (punt, FG try) strikes the ground or a goal post in the opponent's end zone.**

- This results in a touchback.

**f) A free kick (kickoff) is declared dead in the receiver's possession after a fair catch signal, or is declared dead in the receiver's end zone.**

- This results in a touchback.

**g) A touchdown, touchback, safety, or successful field goal is made.**

**h) A runner is so held or otherwise restrained that their forward progress is stopped.**

- The official will blow the whistle and signal the ball dead. This is a judgment call.

**i) A fumbled ball strikes the ground.**

- **Exception:** A fumbled backward pass that strikes the ground is still a *live ball* and can be recovered by either team.

### **ARTICLE 3: BALL READY FOR PLAY**

- The ball must be marked ready for play by the referee before it can be put in play by a snap or free kick.
- This starts the 25-second play clock.

### **ARTICLE 4: BALL IN PLAY – SNAPPER PROTECTION**

- The snapper (the player who snaps the ball) is given special protection.
- After the snap, the snapper cannot be contacted in the head or shoulders, or charged directly into, until they have had time to assume a defensive posture or have moved to block an opponent.
- **Penalty:** 15 yards (Personal Foul).

### **ARTICLE 5: BALL IN PLAY – OUT OF BOUNDS**

- A ball is **out of bounds** when the ball or any part of the runner touches anything, other than another player or a game official, that is on or outside a boundary line.
  - If a runner is held and carried out of bounds by a defender, the ball is dead at the spot where the runner crossed the boundary.
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## Key Points of Emphasis and Common Misconceptions

1. **"Down" vs. "Out of Bounds":** A player is **down** when their knee, elbow, etc., touches the ground. A player is **out of bounds** when they (or the ball) touch anything on or outside the boundary line. These are two different ways a play can end.
2. **The Hand/Foot Rule is Critical:** This is a major difference from the NFL and is often misunderstood. A runner can use their **hands** to touch the ground and **not** be down. They can push themselves back up and keep running. They are only down if another part of their body (knee, hip, forearm, etc.) touches the ground.
3. **Forward Progress:** This is a crucial safety and fairness rule. The ball is spotted at the farthest point the ball reached, even if the runner is driven backward. This prevents defenders from carrying a runner back 10 yards for a loss of yardage.
4. **Fumble vs. Backward Pass:** A **backward pass** (lateral) that hits the ground is a *live ball*. A **forward pass** that hits the ground is an *incomplete pass (dead ball)*. A **fumble** (loss of possession while running) that hits the ground is a *live ball*.
5. **Official's Whistle:** The ball is dead **when the official blows the whistle**, not necessarily when the event happens. However, the whistle is a signal that the ball is *already* dead by rule. If the official errs and blows the whistle inadvertently while the ball is still live, the play is dead at that spot.