



## Football For Dummies (USA Edition)

From Football For Dummies, USA Edition, 4th Edition by Howie Long, John Czarnecki

### Player Positions in American Football

When two opposing American football teams meet on the gridiron (playing field), the player positions depend on whether the football team is playing offense or defense. Football pits the *offense*, the team with the ball, against the *defense*, which tries to prevent the offense from scoring. Each side lines up facing the other with the football in the middle.

### The players on the offensive side

- **Quarterback:** The leader of the team. He calls the plays in the huddle, yells the signals at the line of scrimmage, and receives the ball from the center. Then he hands off the ball to a running back, throws it to a receiver, or runs with it.
- **Center:** The player who snaps the ball to the quarterback. He handles the ball on every play.
- **Running back:** A player who runs with the football. Running backs are also referred to as tailbacks, halfbacks, and rushers.
- **Fullback:** A player who's responsible for blocking for the running back and also for pass-blocking to protect the quarterback. Fullbacks, who are generally bigger than running backs, are short-yardage runners.
- **Wide receiver:** A player who uses his speed and quickness to elude defenders and catch the football. Teams use as many as two to four wide receivers on every play.
- **Tight end:** A player who serves as a receiver and also as a blocker. This player lines up beside the offensive tackle to the right or the left of the quarterback.
- **Left guard and right guard:** The inner two members of the offensive line, whose jobs are to block for and protect the quarterback and ball carriers.
- **Left tackle and right tackle:** The outer two members of the offensive line.

### The players on the defensive side

- **Defensive tackle:** The inner two members of the defensive line, whose jobs are to maintain their positions in order to stop a running play or run through a gap in the offensive line to pressure the quarterback or disrupt the backfield formation.
- **Defensive end:** The outer two members of the defensive line. Generally, their jobs are to overcome offensive blocking and meet in the backfield, where they combine to tackle the quarterback or ball carrier. On running plays to the outside, they're responsible for forcing the ball carrier either out of bounds or toward (into) the pursuit of their defensive teammates.
- **Linebacker:** These players line up behind the defensive linemen and generally are regarded as the team's best tacklers. Depending on the formation, most teams employ either three or four linebackers on every play. Linebackers often have the dual role of defending the run and the pass.
- **Safety:** The players who line up the deepest in the secondary — the last line of defense. There are free safeties and strong safeties, and they must defend the deep pass and the run.
- **Cornerback:** The players who line up on the wide parts of the field, generally opposite the offensive receivers.

## American Football Terms and Definitions

To understand and enjoy American football, get familiar with key terms and what they mean. Until you grasp basic football lingo, listening to announcers call a football game can be like listening to monkey gibberish. The following list fills you in on the basic American football terms you need to know:

- **Backfield:** The group of offensive players — the running backs and quarterback — who line up behind the line of scrimmage.
- **Down:** A period of action that starts when the ball is put into play and ends when the ball is ruled dead (meaning the play is completed). The offense gets four downs to advance the ball 10 yards. If it fails to do so, it must surrender the ball to the opponent, usually by punting on the fourth down.
- **Drive:** The series of plays when the offense has the football, until it punts or scores and the other team gets possession of the ball.
- **End zone:** A 10-yard-long area at each end of the field. You score a touchdown when you enter the end zone in control of the football. If you're tackled in your own end zone while in possession of the football, the other team gets a safety.
- **Extra point:** A kick, worth one point, that's typically attempted after every touchdown (it's also known as the *point after touchdown*, or PAT). The ball is placed on either the 2-yard line (in the NFL) or the 3-yard line (in college and high school) and is generally kicked from inside the 10-yard line after being snapped to the holder. It must sail between the uprights and above the crossbar of the goalpost to be considered good.
- **Fair catch:** When the player returning a punt waves his extended arm from side to side over his head. After signaling for a fair catch, a player can't run with the ball, and those attempting to tackle him can't touch him.
- **Field goal:** A kick, worth three points, that can be attempted from anywhere on the field but is usually attempted within 40 yards of the goalpost. Like an extra point, a kick must sail above the crossbar and between the uprights of the goalpost to be ruled good.
- **Fumble:** The act of losing possession of the ball while running with it or being tackled. Members of the offense and defense can recover a fumble. If the defense recovers the fumble, the fumble is called a turnover.
- **Handoff:** The act of giving the ball to another player. Handoffs usually occur between the quarterback and a running back.
- **Hash marks:** The lines on the center of the field that signify 1 yard on the field. Before every play, the ball is spotted between the hash marks or on the hash marks, depending on where the ball carrier was tackled on the preceding play.
- **Huddle:** When the 11 players on the field come together to discuss strategy between plays. On offense, the quarterback relays the plays in the huddle.
- **Incompletion:** A forward pass that falls to the ground because no receiver could catch it, or a pass that a receiver dropped or caught out of bounds.
- **Interception:** A pass that's caught by a defensive player, ending the offense's possession of the ball.
- **Kickoff:** A free kick (meaning the receiving team can't make an attempt to block it) that puts the ball into play. A kickoff is used at the start of the first and third quarters and after every touchdown and successful field goal.
- **Line of scrimmage:** An imaginary line that extends from where the football is placed at the end of a play to both sides of the field. Neither the offense nor the defense can cross the line until the football is put in play again.
- **Offensive line:** The human wall of five men who block for and protect the quarterback and ball carriers. Every line has a center (who snaps the ball), two guards, and two tackles.
- **Punt:** A kick made when a player drops the ball and kicks it while it falls toward his foot. A punt is usually made on a fourth down when the offense must surrender possession of the ball to the defense because it couldn't advance 10 yards.
- **Red zone:** The unofficial area from the 20-yard line to the opponent's goal line. Holding an opponent to a field goal in this area is considered a moral victory for the defense.
- **Return:** The act of receiving a kick or punt and running toward the opponent's goal line with the intent of scoring or gaining significant yardage.

- **Rushing:** To advance the ball by running, not passing. A running back is sometimes called a *runner*.
- **Sack:** When a defensive player tackles the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage for a loss of yardage.
- **Safety:** A score, worth two points, that the defense earns by tackling an offensive player in possession of the ball in his own end zone.
- **Secondary:** The four defensive players who defend against the pass and line up behind the linebackers and wide on the corners of the field opposite the receivers.
- **Snap:** The action in which the ball is *hiked* (tossed between the legs) by the center to the quarterback, to the holder on a kick attempt, or to the punter. When the snap occurs, the ball is officially in play and action begins.
- **Special teams:** The 22 players who are on the field during kicks and punts. These units have special players who return punts and kicks, as well as players who are experts at covering kicks and punts.
- **Touchdown:** A score, worth six points, that occurs when a player in possession of the ball crosses the plane of the opponent's goal line, when a player catches the ball while in the opponent's end zone, or when a defensive player recovers a loose ball in the opponent's end zone.

### Common Penalties in American Football

Making sense of the penalties in American football can be tough — unless you have a handy list of common penalties to refer to as you watch a football game. Here are some brief explanations of common penalties in American football:

- **Encroachment:** When a defensive player crosses the line of scrimmage and makes contact with an opponent before the ball is snapped. Encroachment is a 5-yard penalty.
- **False start:** When an interior lineman on the offensive team moves prior to the snap of the ball, or when any offensive player makes a quick, abrupt movement prior to the snap of the ball. This is a 5-yard penalty.
- **Holding (defensive):** When a defensive player tackles or holds an offensive player other than the ball carrier. The penalty is 5 yards and an automatic first down.
- **Holding (offensive):** When an offensive player uses his hands, arms, or other parts of his body to prevent a defensive player from tackling the ball carrier. The penalty is 10 yards.
- **Offside:** When any part of a player's body is beyond the line of scrimmage or free kick line when the ball is put into play. Offside is a 5-yard penalty.
- **Pass interference:** A judgment call made by an official who sees a defensive player make contact with the intended receiver before the ball arrives, thus restricting his opportunity to catch the forward pass. In the NFL, this penalty awards the offensive team the ball at the spot of the foul with an automatic first down. In college, pass interference is a 15-yard penalty and an automatic first down.
- **Personal foul:** An illegal, flagrant foul considered risky to the health of another player. A personal foul is a 15-yard penalty.
- **Roughing the kicker:** When a defensive player makes any contact with the punter, provided the defensive player hasn't touched the kicked ball before contact. This is a 15-yard penalty and an automatic first down.
- **Roughing the passer:** When a defensive player makes direct contact with the quarterback after the quarterback has released the ball. This is a 15-yard penalty and an automatic first down.