

Protective Face Masks to be Allowed in High School Soccer

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Contact: Tim Flannery

INDIANAPOLIS (February 2, 2006) - Protective face masks may be worn by high school soccer players with facial injuries, as long as a medical release has been obtained, in accordance with a rule change at the January 22-23 National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Soccer Rules Committee meeting in Indianapolis. The face-mask rule and four other changes made by the committee were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

Rule 4-2-8 was added so that players who have incurred facial injuries can continue to play without fear of re-injury. This rule was made possible as a result of new technology in protective face masks. The new masks are molded to the face with no protrusions, providing no additional risks to the player or opponents, and are legal with the appropriate medical sign-offs, said Bob Lombardi, chair of the NFHS Soccer Rules Committee and associate executive director of the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association. According to Lombardi, this new rule will also prevent players with facial injuries from continuing to play with no protection.

Another change aimed at reducing the risk of injury is a requirement that shinguards meet the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (NOCSAE) standard effective with the 2007-08 season. According to Lombardi, players no longer will be able to wear missized, underrated shinguards. This rule will also require manufacturers to produce shinguards that will minimize risk to players. Correctly sized and safety-regulated shinguards will exponentially help reduce leg injuries incurred while playing soccer, Lombardi said.

The new NOCSAE shinguards will be stamped with the NOCSAE logo. They will specify which size is correct for a particular sized player, making it easy for players, coaches and officials to differentiate which shinguards are to be worn.

Another important rule change provides officials more authority. Rule 5-1-2 states that the jurisdiction of the official officially begins 15 minutes prior to the start of the game and ends with their leaving the field of play and its immediate surroundings. This rule was better defined in effort to further clarify the time period and area of the officials' jurisdiction. The officials now have the authority to penalize inappropriate behavior from coaches, fans and athletes before and after a game to deter unsportsmanlike acts.

Prior to the change, the jurisdiction of the officials began when they entered the field of play and ended when they left the field of play at the conclusion of play. We wanted to create some sort of standard as to where the officials have jurisdiction, Lombardi said. The new rule is in response to questionnaires, and requests from officials, administrators and coaches.

Rule 4-4-1f, which deals with visible apparel worn under shorts, was modified. The former version of the rule required the visible apparel worn under shorts to be the same basic color of the uniform shorts. Because of the difficulty of finding this type of apparel in colors other than white or black, the same-color requirement was eliminated. The rule now requires that the apparel be of similar length, all alike and of a solid color.

The committee altered Rule 4-1-1g to be consistent with other NFHS sports rules codes. The rule states that no manufacturer's logo/trademark or reference is permitted on the outside of each item. Adding the term reference will cover all other items not covered by the term logo/trademark.

In addition to the rules changes each year, the committee identifies certain aspects of the game that need special attention. This year's Points of Emphasis focused on seven themes: game supervision, field markings, participant conduct, end-of-game procedures for officials, reporting incidents, minimizing risks to players, and eyewear.

Soccer is the fifth-most popular sport in both boys and girls high school athletics. Girls soccer had the second-largest gain in girls sports participation numbers in 2004-05, according to the High School Athletics Participation Survey conducted by the NFHS, with an increase of 7,072 participants, bringing it to 316,104 total participants. Boys soccer had 354,587 total participants.

Author: Unknown

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