

INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN FOOTBALL

“In short, in life, as in a football game, the principle to follow is: Hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard.”

— Theodore Roosevelt.

“I truly believe Football is the best game in the world. No sport offers an such an interesting blend of strategy and physicality. There is much more to it than very hard hits, although that is the bread-and-butter of Football of *any* level. Hopefully, this guide will help you learn a little bit about Football, so that you can increase your enjoyment, however you may choose to consume the game “

— Jammy4041

Players

In an Football game, there are 11 players for each team at any one time. The team with the ball is the "offense", and the team without the ball is the "defense"; kicking plays such as kickoffs (to start each half), punts (after a "three-and-out"), field goals and Point-After-Touchdown (PAT), attempts are done by "special teams" players for both teams. As the Offense dictates the tempo of the play, substitutions can only be done for the defense if the offense also makes a substitution as well. Substitutions are "roll on, roll off". Football is a specialized game, with specialized players suited to the run, the pass, as well as down and distance, which are huge factors in the personnel on the field. NFL teams have a 53 man roster, although only 46 can be declared active for each game.

Equipment.

It's NOT padded Rugby, OK?! (There's room to appreciate both!). Each player must wear a protective helmet, with a chin-strap and an unbreakable facemask, shoulder pads and gumshield. Kidney, knee, thigh and coccyx padding are also required. Depending on the surface, players may wear studded boots (cleats). The length can vary depending on the surface, but some cleats can be as long as 1.5 inches. The cleats usually have a higher back, compared to soccer style boots, although some players do play in them. Players also wear lowers, long socks and jerseys. The number on the jersey correlates to the player's position on the team, and must be of a certain size. Numbers are required on the front, back and on the shoulders. Most players wear gloves; the bigger 'linemen' will wear ones with reinforced supports, while the 'skill' players will wear gloves designed to improve their ability to catch the ball.

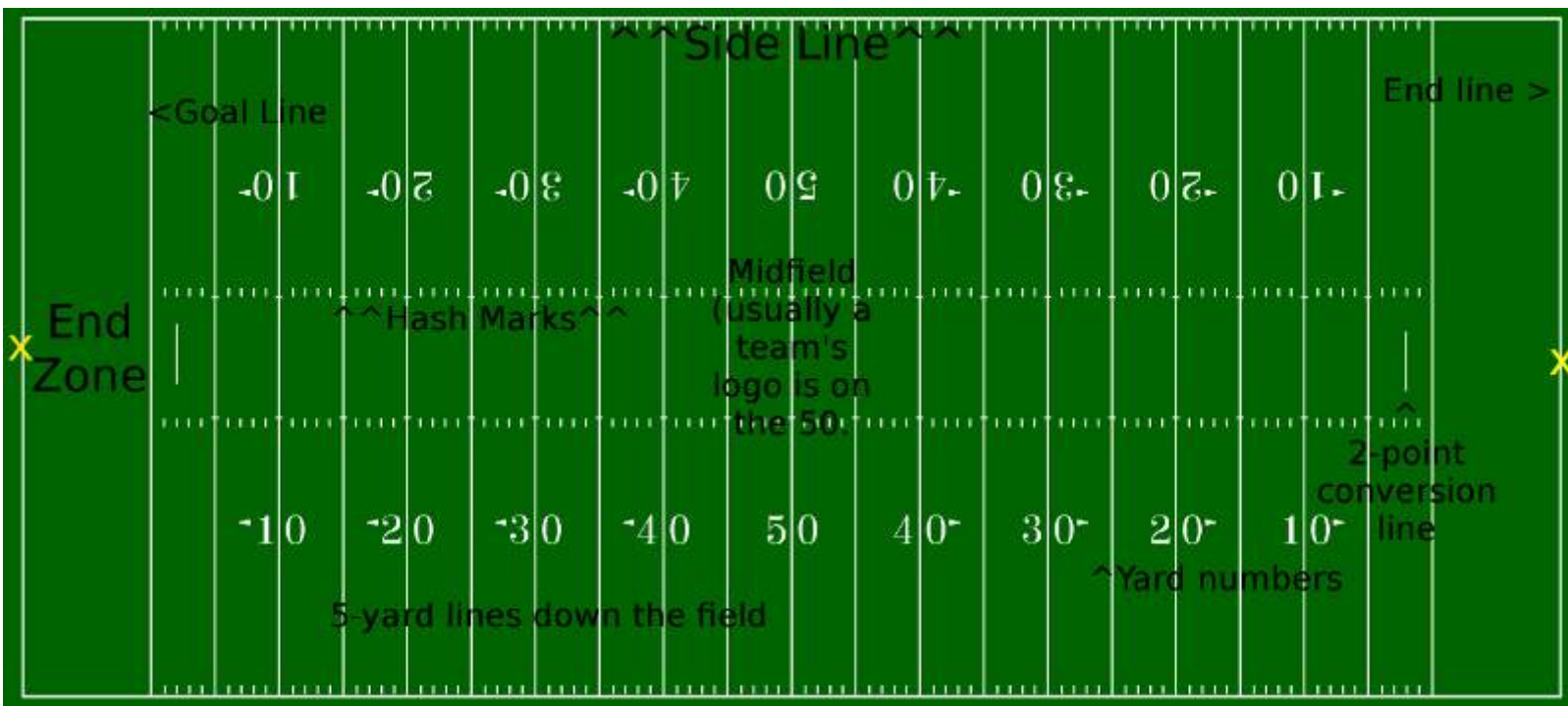
The Football itself is an ovaloid shape, just slightly smaller than a foot. It's very similar to a Rugby ball, but more pointed at the end, so that it really hurts when it hits you in a certain area (!!!), but also has a much more unpredictable bounce than a Rugby ball. College Footballs are slightly smaller than the ones used in the NFL, and have a white line at the end of the ball, so that receivers can locate the ball easier.



The Field

An Football field is 120 yards long by 53.3 yards wide, which is the same at all levels. The field itself is surrounded by . Every 5 yards, there are lines running across the field, with numbers every ten yards. Running down the sideline, is a small set of lines, which mark out each yard. In the middle of the field, there are similar markers, known as “hashmarks.” They allow referees to quickly place the ball to begin the next play. At the end of the field, is the end zone. There is 100 yards between each end-zone, which are 10 yards deep. At the back of the end zone is goal-posts, which has a cross bar which is 10ft off the ground, and two upright posts. At the college level as well as the NFL level, the distance between the vertical uprights is 18ft 6”.

There are differences between the distance between the hashmarks, at each level, with NFL hashmarks being the narrowest at 18ft 6”, and college football being much more narrow than the high school level. This matters because the ball can be spotted on the right hashmark or the left hashmark, or in the middle, depending on whether there has been a first down, or not. Wider hashmarks, in theory, make for an easier kick, due to a shallower angle, for a given distance...(math..eh?). It also affects substitutions, with substitutions being much easier if you are on the hashmark closest to your sideline. The field is bordered by a 6ft white border, which represents the out-of-bounds area. Each team has a sideline for the game, which just outside of the 6ft white area, between the 35 yard lines. It can vary from being very deep at the NFL level to quite shallow at other levels.



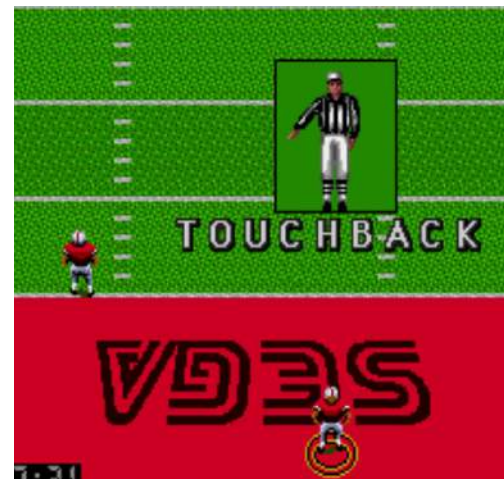
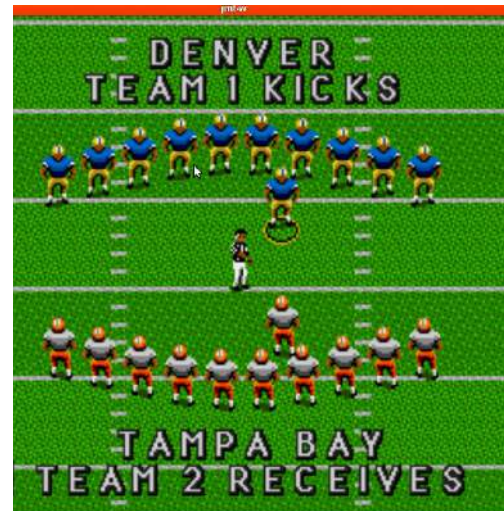
Beginning the Game

Before the game begins, there is a coin toss to decide who kicks off (and therefore, who receives the ball to begin with). The visiting team gets first choice of the coin toss. The winner gets first choice in one of two decisions: he can choose which end to defend, or whether to receive the ball first (or not). If they win the coin toss, most teams will defer receiving the kick off to get the ball back first after half time.

The ball is placed on kicking tee on the 35 yard line and the kicker takes a running start from about the 30 yard line. You will notice 5 players left and 5 players right also running. They have to basically run towards the kick returner; the aim being to limit the return to give the defense the best possible field position. The kicker and two others (one either side) will run forward, and sort of hold back, playing to protect against the return should the kick-returner break through. As well as being done at the start of each half, as well as before each overtime, Kickoffs are done after each scoring play -- so Field Goals and Touchdowns; after a safety, it is a little different, however.

Basically, the kicking team becomes the defense and the receiving team becomes the offense. Normal kickoffs can be returned, at the risk of the kick-returner being tackled, or worse, "fumbling" the football, but most at the NFL level goes for a 'touch-back', where it goes out of the opposing end-zone. After a touch-back, in the NFL, the offense gets the ball on its own 20, to start its drive. In college, after a touch-back, the offense gets the ball at its own 25.

There is a special type of kickoff, where the ball is kicked hard into the ground by the kicker. This is known as an 'onside kick' and is the most dangerous, and exciting play in the game. As long as the kicking team kicks the ball ten yards, or if the opposing team hits the ball first (regardless of whether the ball has traveled 10 yards) they can recover the ball. To recover the onside kick the team bunches up 5 of their players to one side, and 4, excluding the kicker to the other. To recover an onside kick, the kicking team has to force the returning team to fumble, and then they must have their players fall on top of the football to secure it. There is usually quite the tussle to get the ball after a fumble, since the onside kick is used mostly in desperation situations, deep into the fourth quarter, where the team has just scored, and needs another score to tie or win the game.



The Game itself.

So, what's the basic aim? To win by outscoring the opponent, of course! Take it away, John Madden:

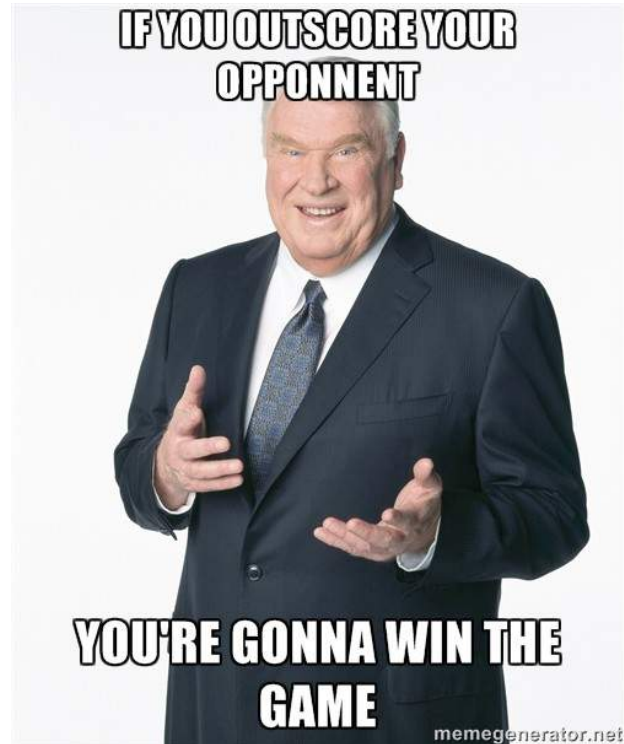
The game is divided into four, 15-minute quarters. At the end of each quarter, the teams swap ends, and there is a timeout called. There are actually two clocks to keep time. The "game clock" shows how much time there is left in each quarter. The "play clock" shows how much time the offense has to snap the ball between downs.

Teams can stop the game clock in a few ways. An incomplete pass stops the clock. If a player catches the ball and is pushed out of bounds, or a player runs the ball out of bounds, the game clock also stops. The subsequent play clock, would be 25 seconds. If a player keeps in bounds, the game clock keeps ticking down. There is also 40 seconds available on the play-clock, after the end of the previous down. Teams can 'milk the clock', by letting the play clock run down, which is especially important if they are winning, to lessen the time available to the opposing team to be able to come back. At the college level, the game clock stops while the chains are moved, and starts counting down again when the chains are in place.

Each team has three time outs per half, and they must use them carefully. Clock management is a very important part of Football, especially towards the end of each half.

In the NFL, at the end of each half, (ie. at the end of the second and fourth quarters) there is the "Two-minute warning", where the clock is stopped for one minute. There is an additional two-minute warning if the game gets to overtime, and the clock counts down to 2:00. Sometimes teams are able to get a snap away just before the two-minute warning, so it is called immediately after the play concludes, when a dead ball declared. TV is very important to the NFL, so it is used for adverts and to further tension in a close game. The two-minute warning always stops the game clock. In college football, there is no two-minute warning.

The offense has four attempts, or "downs" to advance the ball ten yards, through a combination of running and passing the football. If a player is tackled to the ground, there is a loss of a down, and the play resumes on the line parallel to the tackle. So, with a three yard run on first down, it then becomes 2nd and 7. And then, with a two yard tackle for loss, 3rd and 9 etc. If the offense gains the necessary yardage, they can get a fresh set of downs, and another 4 plays to get another ten yards.



As you can see in the following picture, the flag represents the line of scrimmage. This was a First and 10 play. The first marker represents the original line of scrimmage. The second marker (the first-down marker), represents the yardage which is necessary to get another set of downs. In real-life the flag, would have a number to represent the down which is currently being played. The markers themselves are chained together, so that they are always 10 yards apart. This is why they are also known as the chains, and a team which gets first-down, is known to be "moving the chains."



On the television, the line of scrimmage is usually represented by a blue line across the field, and the first-down line is usually represented by a yellow line. These are not official. If the ball is very close to a first down. The chain crew can bring out the markers, walking them across the field, and they will stretch the first down marker out.

Each play begins at the line of scrimmage, with the position of the ball representing a neutral boundary. The offense must have seven players on the line of scrimmage, at the time when the ball is 'snapped', where the center (one of the offensive lineman) puts the ball between the legs to give to his quarterback.

After three plays, if the ball hasn't been advanced, the offense usually leaves the field and the "special teams" unit comes on to kick a field goal or to punt. Forcing an offense to leave the field, is called a "three-and-out."

Generally, although there are four downs to get the necessary yardage, going for a fourth down conversion is incredibly risky: if the offense goes for it and fails, there is a "turnover on downs"; and the opposing team gets the football at the point that the offense managed to advance the ball to. In practice, anything within the opposing 37 yard line is in most kickers' field goal range.

Anything beyond this and the ball will be punted away-- this has the benefit of pinning back the offense, and their giving the defense more chance to get a stop and get the offense back on the field. The punter is about 15 yards away from the line of scrimmage (12 yards in the NFL) to get the kick away. Punts can be downed by the 'offense' to get further distance, fair-caught (where the receiver puts up his arm – at that point, he cannot be touched by the kicking team).

If the receiving team touches the ball, for instance, with the ball coming off the hands of the punt-returner, the ball is live, and can be recovered by the kicking team. In that case, their offense will get back on to the field and take over at the point. This is known as a 'muffed catch.' it's similar to a fumble, but the key difference is that the punt-returner did not have possession. A ball can also take a terrible bounce, and hit the receiving team, in which case, the ball is then 'live' and can be recovered by the kicking team. Teams can set up to block the kick or to set up the punt return.

Around midfield, it is a key area for a fake punt. Punts are still fourth-down plays, so the necessary yardage still has to be made up to move the chains.

Scoring:

Touchdowns, 6 points:

To be a touchdown, the ball has to only break the plane of the goal line. It can be done by rushing, receiving or even by an interception return (also known as a "pick-six") or fumble recovery. Rarely, kick returns and punt returns can be returned for a touchdown, and missed field goals can be returned by the opposing defense for a touchdown.

However, with receptions, the receiver has to have complete control, and 'finish the process of the catch', by placing two feet down (only has to be one in College, however). The end-zones are usually colored.

As side point, the white chalk surrounding the end-zone to the side does not count as part of the end-zone. If a receiver were to jump up and have any part of him land on the white area before getting his foot in the end-zone, the process of the catch would not be complete and it would be an incomplete pass.



PATs:

The "Point After Touchdown"...it is done, um, after every touchdown...even "pick sixes." The team lines up on the two yard line, and can do one of two things: Kick (roughly an 20 yard chip shot, once you include the 10 yards of the endzone and the 10 or so yards to the holder and kicker) for just one point after [but one which has a >99% success rate]. Alternatively, the team can risk, by running what is essentially a 4th down play from the 2 yard line, for two extra points, passing and rushing in the usual manner. In the NFL, the clock doesn't run during the PAT attempt; and any blocked PATs or intercepted two-point conversions cannot affect the game. Play resumes with a kickoff, as normal. In the college game, failed PATs can be returned for a safety. (The offense still keeps its 6 points, however). In the NFL, failed PATs are blown dead, and the defense cannot score any points out of it.

Field Goals, 3 points:

A field goal attempt is a kicking attempt through the posts. Furthermore, the posts have an infinite height, so as long as the ball is through the posts, then the kick is good. Since the kicker is about 7 yards behind the line of scrimmage, you need to add on that yardage, and the 10 yards for the end-zone yardage for the attempt. So, if the ball is on the opposition 20 when the offense goes three-and-out, they can try a field goal, which would be 20+7+10, or a 37 yard field goal attempt.

In the NFL, if there is a failed field goal, the other team's offense takes over at the point where the kick was missed. It's like a fourth down, turnover, but more costly. So, if that 37 yard kick was to be missed, the defense would take over on downs, at the 27 yard line, rather than the 20 yard line, which was the previous line of scrimmage. Blocked field goals (as well as punts), can be returned by the defense for a score. Similarly, a field goal which is short of

the goal posts, may be returned for a touch-down, however, this is a very rare occurrence, since teams generally prefer the extra field position from a short kick, taking over at the point where the kick was missed, rather than taking a chance on returning a short field goal, and risk losing extra yardage.

Safeties, 2 points:

Essentially an "own goal" by the offense. Since the line of scrimmage can never be in the end zone, it usually happens because the quarterback or running back are behind the line of scrimmage when the play begins within their own 10 yard line and then tackled while in the end-zone, or that the offensive players inside the end-zone commit a penalty. Safeties can also happen if a kick-returner catches the ball outside the end-zone, and runs, or is pushed back into the end-zone, to a point where he is down in the end-zone. Teams may take an intentional safety, for the purposes of clock management.

The team which gave the safety, must kick the ball to the opposing team. Unlike a normal kickoff, the ball is spotted at their own 20, and can be done in three ways. It can be like a normal kickoff, without the tee, and with someone holding the ball, however that has a large chance to be returned for a big gain. Usually, teams will punt the ball away from the 20, to limit the return. Occasionally, the ball can be bounced on the ground before being kicked on the volley (known as a drop kick), however this is very rare due to the bounce of the football.



Penalties and Flags.

Ugh...too complicated. Maybe another day!!

Class dismissed. ||