



## AIA Unified Flag Football Sport & Competition Rules

AIA Unified Flag Football is an AIA-sanctioned sport supported by and in conjunction with Special Olympics Arizona (SOAZ) to allow interscholastic competition in Unified Sports between Arizona high schools. It was established to foster inclusion, camaraderie, and the development of meaningful relationships between students with and without intellectual disabilities as high school athletes and teammates.

### Equipment & Uniforms:

1. An intermediate (youth) size football will be used in all divisions.
2. A protective mouthpiece must be constantly worn.
3. A one-piece, three-flag belt will always be worn during the game.
4. All participants must have a playing uniform consisting of matching shirts, shorts, and pants with matching numbers on the front and back. The pants can be tucked in at the waist to avoid obstruction of Flag Pulling. Athletes wear even, and partners wear odd.
5. No jewelry may be worn (rings, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, etc.)
6. No blue jeans will be allowed.
7. All players must wear athletic shorts without pockets.
8. Players must wear rubber-cleated or flat-soled athletic shoes.
  - a. Metal cleats, spikes, hiking boots, or other equipment deemed dangerous by officials will not be allowed.

### Field:

#### Playing Field

1. The playing field is 60 yards long (including the end zones) and 25 yards wide. If insufficient space is available, a slightly smaller space can be used. A space of at least 5 yards around the field must be free and clear of obstructions. The field can be marked with chalk, paint, and traffic cones.
2. No-run zones are in place to prevent teams from



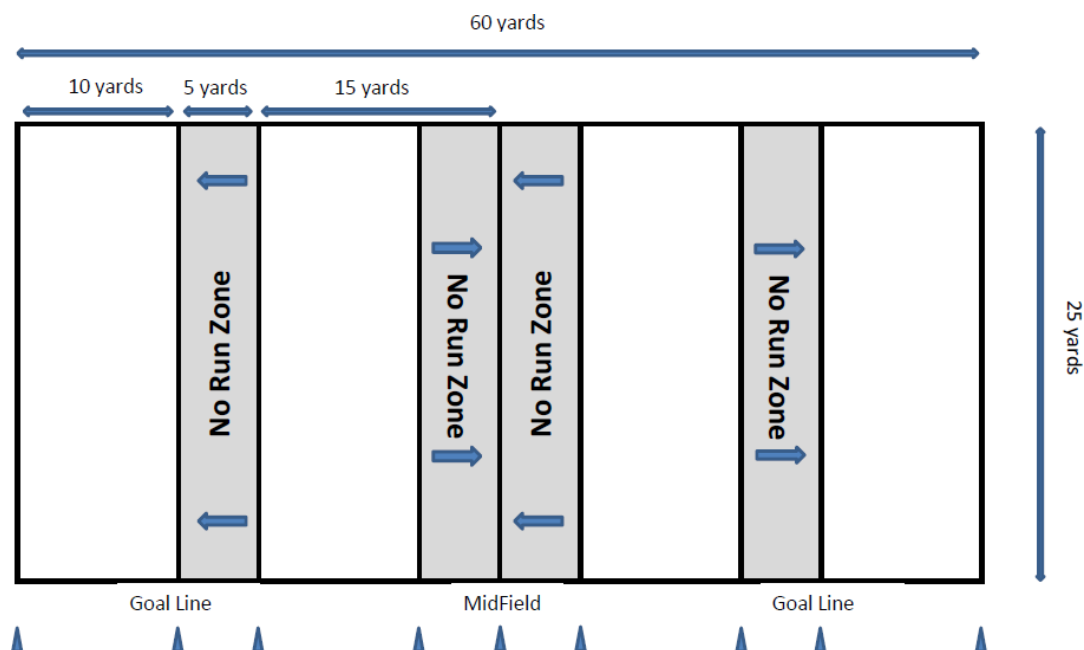
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conducting power-run plays. In the No-Run Zones (a 5-yard imaginary zone before midfield and before the end zone), teams cannot run the ball in any fashion. All plays must be passing plays, even with a handoff.

3. Stepping on a boundary line is considered out of bounds.

4. Each offensive team approaches only TWO (2) No-Run Zones in each drive (a 5-yard zone before midfield to gain the first down and before the end zone, 5 yards from the goal line to score a TD).

*Diagram of Flag Football Field*



## Rosters:

### Unified Sports® Teams

1. The team roster may contain a maximum of 12 players.
2. The roster shall contain a proportionate number of athletes and partners.
3. During competition, teams shall field five (5) players to start the game (required).



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- a. The line-up shall never exceed three (3) athletes and two (2) partners at any time.
- b. Teams may continue with a minimum of four (4) players (minus one partner or athlete) due to disqualification or injury.
4. Failure to adhere to the required ratio results in a forfeit.

## Timing & Overtime:

### Timing

1. The following options are available to the tournament director and will be identified before State/Provincial/National competitions based on program needs, time, and number of teams attending. Only one option may be used during the competition.
  - i. **Option 1:** The game shall consist of two (2) 20-minute halves (running time).
  - ii. **Option 2:** The game shall consist of two (2) 20-minute halves (running time) until the last minute of each half, at which point the clock will stop on all dead ball whistles (i.e., incomplete pass, out of bounds, change of possession).
2. Officials can stop the clock at their discretion (injuries, delays).
3. The clock will stop at all time-outs.
4. Each team receives one (1) 60-second time-out per half.

An unused time-out in the first half does not carry over to the second half.
5. There shall be a 5-minute break at halftime.
6. The ball must be put into play promptly and legally, and any action or lack of action by either team that tends to prevent this is considered a delay of the game.
7. Mercy Rule – If a team is up 25 or more points in the last minute of the game, the clock will continue to run (if using Option 2 stated above in 1ii).
8. This includes:
  - i. Interrupting the 30-second count for any reason except for a granted time-out,
  - ii. Consuming more than 30 seconds to snap the ball after it is ready



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for play,

- iii. Failing to remove an injured player for whose benefit an excess time-out has been granted or
- iv. Deliberately advancing the ball after it has been declared dead.

### Overtime

1. If the score is tied at the end of regulation play:
  - i. A coin toss is held to determine the first possession.
  - ii. Each team receives two (2) plays from midfield, and the team gaining the most points or gaining a yardage advantage is awarded one (1) extra point and wins the game.
  - iii. Exceptions to this rule are as follows:  
Interception: The team that intercepts the pass automatically wins the game.
2. If the team with the first attempt in overtime scores on the first play, the opposing team must also score on its first play. If both teams score a touchdown or gain the exact yardage, the procedure is repeated until one (1) team wins.

### Scoring:

1. **Touchdown:** six (6) points.
2. **Extra Point:** one (1) point from the 5-yard line, two (2) points from the 12-yard line (or any distance outside 5 yards due to a penalty).
3. **Safety:** two (2) point

### Live Ball/Dead ball:

1. Positions/Snap
  - a. The ball must be snapped between the Center's legs to start each play.
  - b. No minimum number of players is required to line up on the line of scrimmage.
2. Dead Balls/Fumbles
  - a. There are no fumbles.
  - b. Play is ruled dead when:
    - i. The ball carrier's flag is pulled.
    - ii. The ball carrier loses its flag.



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- iii. The ball carrier steps out of bounds.
  - iv. The ball carrier's knee or hand touches the ground.
  - v. A touchdown, extra point, or safety is scored.
  - vi. During a try-for-point, the defense obtains possession of the ball.
  - vii. When a forward pass strikes the ground or is caught simultaneously by opposing players (the offense retains possession).
  - viii. A pass is intercepted (no returns).
  - ix. A receiver catches a ball without their flags attached.
  - x. A snapped ball touches the ground.
  - xi. If the ball is fumbled forward, it is spotted where the ball carrier's feet were at the time of the fumble. If the ball falls backward, it is marked where it hits the ground.
  - xii. When there is an inadvertent whistle.
3. Inadvertent Whistle
- a. In case of an inadvertent whistle, the team in possession of the ball may choose to accept the play's result at the point where the play was blown dead or choose to replay the down.
4. Substitutions (Athlete for Athlete/ Partner for Partner)
- a. Any player on the roster may enter upon completing a play (Dead Ball).
  - b. Each substitute must play at least one (1) down before being replaced.
  - c. A replaced player must leave the field immediately.
- 5 Delay of Game
- a. The ball must be put into play promptly and legally, and any action or lack of action by either team that tends to prevent this is considered a delay in the game.
  - b. This includes:
    - i. Interrupting a 30-second count for any reason except for a granted time-out,
    - ii. Consuming more than 30 seconds to snap the ball after it is ready for play,
    - iii. Failing to remove an injured player for whose benefit an excess time-out has been granted or
    - iv. Deliberately advancing the ball after it has been declared dead.
6. False Start
- a. No offensive team member may simulate the start of the play before the ball is snapped.

## Running:



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1. Handling the Ball by the offense.
  - a. Handling the ball transfers player possession from one teammate to another without throwing or kicking it.
  - b. Only direct handoffs behind the line of scrimmage are permitted. Handoffs may be in front, behind, or to the side of the quarterback or offensive player, but it must be behind the line of scrimmage.**
  - c. The offense may use multiple handoffs behind the line of scrimmage.**
  - d. "Center Sneak"—The ball must leave the center's hands on the snap and step backward off the line of scrimmage to receive the direct handoff from the quarterback/offensive player before advancing the ball.**
2. Running
  - a. The Quarterback (first player gaining possession of the snap) cannot advance the ball across the line of scrimmage.
  - b. Only direct hand-offs behind the line of scrimmage are legal. Any laterals or pitches (legally known as backward passes) are not allowed.
    - i. In Unified Sports® divisions, a partner may hand off to a partner behind the line of scrimmage.
  - c. The player who takes a hand-off can pass the ball if they do not pass the line of scrimmage.
  - d. "No Running Zones" are 5 yards before the mid-field and goal lines.
    - i. Any ball snapped from these zones must be passed.
    - ii. "No Running Zones" aims to avoid short-yardage power-running situations.
  - e. The ball carrier may not spin, dive, hurdle, stiff arm, or use either arm to shield a defender from grasping their flag.
  - f. The ball is marked at the spot where it is positioned when the player is declared down (the carrier's flag belt is pulled or a hand/knee touches the ground).
3. Hurdling
  - a. Jumping over or attempting to jump over a player by the ball carrier to prevent from being downed or to gain additional yardage is illegal.
    - i. Note: Jumping over a player on the ground to avoid injury is legal, by the official's judgment.



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### **4. Shielding (Flag Guarding)**

- a. Runners shall not shield (flag guard) by using their hands, arms, or the ball to deny an opponent the opportunity to pull or remove their flag belt.
- b. This includes:
  - i. Swinging the hand or arm over the flag belt.
  - ii. Stiff arms.
  - iii. Placing the ball in a possession over the flag belt and
  - iv. Lowering the shoulders or arm over the flag belt.
  - v. Hurdling.

## **Passing/Receiving:**

- 1. Passing and Receiving by the offense.
  - a. All passes must be forward and received beyond the line of scrimmage.
  - b. Shovel passes are allowed but must be received beyond the line of scrimmage.
  - c. All players, including the quarterback, can receive a forward pass if they have legally handed it off.
    - i. Exception: In Unified Sports® divisions, only athletes are eligible receivers if a partner throws a pass.
  - d. Only one (1) player is allowed in motion at the snap, and they may not move toward the line of scrimmage at the snap.
  - e. A player must have at least one (1) foot in bounds when making a catch.
  - f. Interceptions change possession of the ball at the point of the interception.
    - i. Exception: A ball intercepted in the end zone is spotted at the 5-yard line.
- 2. Diving
  - a. A defensive or offensive player may dive to catch a pass.
  - b. Diving is illegal when used to down a player or advance a ball.
  - c. A player cannot dive to gain extra yardage.
  - d. The team will be penalized accordingly.
- 3. Eligible Receiver
  - a. All offensive players are eligible to receive a pass, except in Unified Sports® divisions, where partners are ineligible when partners are throwing the pass.
    - i. Unified Sports® teams are expected to comply



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with this rule without intervention by officials.

- b. Failure to “self-patrol” will be considered unsportsmanlike and penalized accordingly.

### Rushing the Passer:

1. Rushing the Quarterback by defensive players (QB).
  - a. All players who rush the Quarterback must be at least 7 yards from the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped.
    - i. A particular marker, placed by the official, will designate the spot 7 yards from the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped.
  - b. Players not rushing the quarterback may defend the line of scrimmage.
  - c. Once the Quarterback hands off the ball, the 7-yard zone no longer exists, and all defenders are eligible to rush.

### Screen Blocking:

1. Screen Blocking
  - a. Legally obstructing an opponent without contacting them with any part of the screen blocker’s body.
  - b. The screen blocker shall have his/her arms fully extended to the ground (below the waist) either at his/her side, in front, or behind his/her back.
  - c. Using arms, elbows, legs, or shoulders to initiate contact during the screen block is illegal.
  - d. A player must be on their feet before, during, and after screen blocking.
  - e. Screen blocking is the only form of legal blocking that can be used by any player at any time.
  - f. There are two forms of legal blocking:
    - Backfield Blocking:** If any of the provisions listed are violated and contact results, the screener has committed an illegal block.
      - i. The screen blocker must give an opponent at least one (1) step.
      - ii. The screen blocker must not initiate contact with an opponent.
      - iii. The screen blocker may not take a position so close to a moving opponent that this opponent cannot avoid contact by stopping or changing





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directions.

- iv. After the ball snaps, a blocker may move two (2) steps laterally or backward. **Downfield Blocking:** A basketball-style (non-moving) screen is the only acceptable form of downfield blocking. The blocker also may not run between a rusher and a ball carrier, impeding a defender's progress to the flag.

### Flag Pulling:

#### Flag Pulling

- a. A legal flag pull occurs when the ball carrier fully possesses the ball.
- b. It is illegal to pull or strip the ball from the carrier's possession at any time (penalty).
- c. If a player's flag belt inadvertently falls off during the play, the player is down immediately upon possession of the ball, and the play ends
- d. a defensive player may not intentionally pull the flags off a player who does not have the ball (penalty).
- e. Flag Guarding/Shielding is an attempt by the ball carrier to obstruct the defense's access to the flags by stiff arming, dropping the head or shoulder, or intentionally covering the flags with the football jersey.

### Formations:

- 1. Line of Scrimmage
  - a. Each team's line of scrimmage is a vertical plane through the point of the ball nearest the team's goal line.
  - b. Each player on a team must be on its side of the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped.
- 2. Motion
  - a. Only one offensive team player may be in motion at the snap.
    - i. This player must be behind the line of scrimmage and not moving toward the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped.
    - ii. If the player comes to a stop, they must be set for one (1) second.



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3. Shift
  - a. A shift is the action of one (1) or more offensive players who move to a new position before the snap after taking a set position.
  - b. A shift player must reset for one (1) second before the snap.
4. Snap
  - a. A snap is the legal act of passing the ball through the Center's legs from the ground to the Quarterback to start a play.

### **Unified Sports:**

1. The roster shall contain a proportionate number of athletes and partners.
2. During competition, teams shall field five (5) players to start the game (required).
  - a. The line-up shall never exceed three (3) athletes and two (2) partners at any time.
  - b. Teams may continue with a minimum of four (4) players (minus one partner or athlete) due to disqualification or injury.
3. Failure to adhere to the required ratio results in a forfeit.
4. Each team shall have an adult non-playing coach responsible for the line-up and conduct of the team during the competition.
5. Partners as quarterbacks may NOT pass to another partner.
6. Partners MAY hand off to another partner.
7. Partners shall NOT dominate play.

### **Unsportsmanlike Conduct:**

1. Sportsmanship/Roughing
  - i. The officials will disqualify any player who participates in rough or unsportsmanlike play.
  - ii. During player possession, it is illegal for a defensive player to strip or pull the ball from the ball carrier at any time.
  - iii. No warning is required.
2. Ball carriers *MUST* try to avoid defenders with an established position.



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3. Defenders cannot run through the ball carrier when pulling flags.

### Penalties:

#### Penalties

- a. The following options are available to teams. The State Office or Technical Delegate will identify them before the state/national competition based on program needs, time, and the number of teams. Only one option may be used during the competition.
  - i. **Option 1:** The coaches can decline or accept the penalty based on the play's result.
  - ii. **Option 2:** Each team can decline a penalty twice during a game. Otherwise, all penalties are automatically accepted
  - iii. **Option 3:** All penalties are automatically accepted (no declination).
- b. Option 1 or 2 may accept the penalty while the yardage is declined.
- c. All penalties are assessed from the line of scrimmage.
- d. No penalty may take the ball more than half the distance to the offender's goal line.
- e. Offense: 10 yards from the line of scrimmage and loss of down
  - i. Illegal Motion (more than one (1) player moving at the snap, moving forward at the snap).
  - ii. Offside (in the neutral zone at the snap, false start).
  - iii. Illegal forward/backward pass (pass not completed beyond the line of scrimmage; illegal backward pass; Partner to Partner; QB passes beyond the line of scrimmage).
  - iv. Illegal Procedure (quarterback run).
  - v. Pass Interference (picking or pushing the defender).
  - vi. Illegal Contact (holding, blocking, bumping, stiff-arming).
  - vii. Flag Guarding (driving, spinning, warding off, hurdling); and
  - viii. Delay of Game (failing to snap within 30 seconds of ready).
- f. Defense: 10 yards from the line of scrimmage and automatic first down
  - i. Offside (in or beyond the neutral zone at the snap).
  - ii. Pass Interference.
  - iii. Illegal Contact (holding, blocking, bumping, stripping).
  - iv. Illegal Flag Pull (before the receiver has the ball); and
  - v. Illegal Rushing (rushing Quarterback inside the 7-yard line).



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### Offensive Penalties and Protocol:

**Illegal Motion Offside** – 10 yards from the line of scrimmage & loss of down  
**Illegal forward/backward pass** – 10 yards from the line of scrimmage & loss of down  
**Illegal procedure** - 10 yards from the line of scrimmage & loss of down  
**Pass interference** - 10 yards from the line of scrimmage & loss of down  
**Illegal contact** - 10 yards from the line of scrimmage & loss of down  
**Flag guarding/shielding** - 10 yards from the line of scrimmage & loss of down  
**Delay of game** - 10 yards from the line of scrimmage & loss of down

### Defensive Penalties and Protocol

**Offside** – 10yards from the line of scrimmage & automatic first down  
**Pass interference** - 10yards from the line of scrimmage & automatic first down  
**Illegal contact** - 10yards from the line of scrimmage & automatic first down  
**Illegal flag pull** - 10yards from the line of scrimmage & automatic first down  
**Illegal rushing** - 10yards from the line of scrimmage & automatic first down

### MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT

Meaningful Involvement ensures that every player can contribute to their team's success through unique skills and qualities.

#### *Examples of Meaningful Involvement not being followed –*

- a. No player (Unified Athlete or Partner) may over-intimidate or be overly aggressive at any time
  - b. A player consistently displays superior skills and dominates individually on the court's serving or receiving end.
  - c. One player scores virtually all the points in a game.
  - d. Teammates do not communicate with each other during the games.
  - e. A player there makes negative or disparaging comments teammate or the opposing team's players.
- ii. Protocol
- a. If a coach feels that an opposing team's player is dominating play, the coach can call a time-out (uncharged) to discuss with the opposing team's coach.
  - b. The official will decide if the coaches cannot



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agree on whether a player dominates the play.

- c. If the player is deemed to be dominating in his play, the official shall sanction the player and coach. Sanctions will include issuing a team warning for player domination, citing the player and coach with unsportsmanlike conduct, or removing the player and coach from the match if the violation is egregious.
- iii. Teams are allowed a maximum of two warnings for player domination. Upon the third violation of player domination, the offending team will be required to forfeit the match.

### **Other Rules to consider:**

- If you arrive 10 minutes late to your match, it will result in a forfeit, but you can still play the remaining time of your scheduled match.
- If an athlete or a partner is on the school football team, they cannot participate on the unified flag football team.
- Athletes wear even numbers, and partners wear odd numbers.