

Beanbags – The mystery solved

One of the mysteries of football officiating involves when to use a beanbag. Almost nothing of its use is mentioned in either the rulebook or the mechanics manual. That being said, it has a definite purpose and, when used correctly, is an aid to officiating.

Definition: The beanbag is an official's administrative game item used to mark specific spots on a football field where certain player or game actions occur. An official shall use a beanbag to mark the spot:

- Where a fumble occurs
- Where a scrimmage kick ends
- Where the kicking team first touches a kick (in certain situations)
- Where a Team A or Team K player goes out of bounds by accident or voluntarily
- Where the ball is caught or recovered when the momentum exception applies
- Where the ball is located when an inadvertent whistle occurs

Mechanics: A beanbag should be dropped, not thrown. It does not have to land on the specific blade of grass where the fumble, touching, or possession took place; it only needs to be on the appropriate yard line. Do not launch your beanbag overhand in an attempt to hit an exact spot on the other side of the field. You will likely end up being off of the spot by a yard or two. An underhand throw of the beanbag is desirable since its use is more passive than the use of the penalty flag. Have a beanbag in hand before the kickoff if an onside kick is anticipated. A beanbag may also be used in rare instances where a spot must be left to address dead-ball issues such as fighting.

- When in doubt as to whether or not drop a beanbag, go ahead and use it. There is no such thing as an "inadvertent beanbag." You can pick it up if tossed in error. Nothing has to be explained to players or coaches.

All officials should carry at least one beanbag, usually folded over the belt and opposite the penalty flag. Beanbags should be white or blue, depending on crew/association preference and weather conditions. The official (BJ for 5-man, LJ for 4-man) that rules on action on and by punt receivers must have two beanbags. One is to mark the end of the kick, the other to indicate the spot of first touching. At times, both of those spots must be covered. Other officials may never need a second bag, but it doesn't hurt to have two.

A beanbag is not needed to indicate the spot where a free kick ends or where a pass is intercepted. Those spots will never be used for penalty enforcement. It is also not to be used as a substitute for hustle. When working as a wing official, if a runner goes out of bounds several yards downfield from your position, do not throw the beanbag then run to the spot. Hustle to the spot as you would for any other play.

Situations:

- Fumbles
 - o **Why:** The spot where a ball is fumbled is important because it identifies where the run ends. For fouls during the interval between the fumble and recovery (i.e. while the ball is loose), we need to know the basic spot for penalty enforcement (Rule: 10-6).
 - o **Example:** First down and 10 for Team A at the A-20. A33 runs to the A-35, where he fumbles. While the ball is loose, A54 holds B12 at the A-40. A7 falls on the ball at the A-45. **Ruling:** The basic enforcement spot for the penalty is the A-35, where the fumble occurred. The covering official must drop a beanbag to mark the fumble spot. Since the spot of the foul is in advance of the fumble, enforcement is from the spot of the fumble. Thus, it is Team A's ball, first down and five from the A-25.
- Scrimmage Kick
 - o **Why:** A beanbag should be dropped where a scrimmage kick ends. That is the post-scrimmage kick (PSK) spot. If a PSK foul occurs during the kick, the PSK spot is the basic spot for penalty enforcement (Rules: 2-16-2h, 10-4-3).
 - o **Example:** R9 muffs a punt at the R-35. The ball rolls forward to the R-40. R9 picks up the ball there and runs to midfield where he is tackled. While the ball was loose from the muff, R89 blocks K13 in the back and above the waist at the R-45. **Ruling:** The kick ended where R9 possessed the kick, not where he muffed it. A beanbag should be dropped at the R-40 (the PSK spot), which is the spot for penalty enforcement. The result is Team R's ball, first and 10 from the R-30.

- First Touching
 - **Why:** A beanbag should be dropped when the kicking team first touches a kick in certain situations. For free kicks, Team K cannot be first to touch the ball unless it has gone 10 yards beyond its restraining line. For scrimmage kicks, Team K cannot first touch the ball beyond the neutral zone. NFHS calls this “First Touching” (Rules: 6-1-6, 6-2-5).
 - **Example #1:** Team K attempts an onside kick. The ball hits the ground, touches K1’s leg before it travels 10 yards, and then rolls several more yards, where K22 falls on it. **Ruling:** A beanbag should be dropped where K1 was contacted by the ball. This is the location of first touching. Team R will likely choose to start a new series, first and 10 at the spot of K1’s touching.
 - **Example #2:** K99’s punt beyond the neutral zone is rolling when K65 touches it at the R-20. The ball rolls to the R-5, where K87 falls on it. **Ruling:** A beanbag should be dropped at the R-20 because that is the spot of K65’s touching. It is R’s ball, first and 10 at the R-20.

Note: Do not blow your whistle when the kicking team is guilty of first touching. Drop your beanbag (not your flag) and allow the play to continue to its end.

- Player out of bounds
 - **Why:** When a Team A or Team K player goes out of bounds by accident or voluntarily, he is guilty of illegal participation when he returns inbounds (Rules: 9-6-1, 9-6-2). The rule is the same if a player delays in returning after being forced out by an opponent, but there is no foul if he comes back immediately. Use your beanbag in all cases to mark where the player exited the field. That foul’s basic enforcement spot is where the player returned to the field of play.
 - **Example:** Team A’s ball third and six from the A-24. A80 runs a pass route and mistakenly steps on the sideline at the A-30. A80 then catches a pass inbounds at the B-45. **Ruling:** When the covering official sees A80’s foot hit the chalk, he should drop a beanbag at that location. The flag is thrown where A80 returned to the field. Since that 15-yard illegal participation foul occurred during a pass play, enforcement is half the distance from the previous spot. It is Team A’s ball, third and 18 from the A-12.
- Momentum
 - **Why:** If a Team B or Team R player catches or recovers a loose ball inside his own five yard line and his original momentum takes him into his endzone where the ball subsequently becomes dead in his possession, Team B or Team R gets the ball at the spot where possession was gained (Momentum Exception: 8-5-2a Exc).
 - **Example:** B12 intercepts a pass, recovers a Team A fumble, or catches a kick at the B-4. His momentum carries him into his endzone, where he is tackled. **Ruling:** An official should drop a beanbag at the B-4. That is where B12 first possessed the ball. Since the momentum exception applies, the beanbag marks the spot at which Team B will get the ball. The result is first and 10 for Team B from the B-4.
- Inadvertent Whistle
 - **Why:** If the ball is in possession of a player when an inadvertent whistle is sounded, the location of the ball is important because it will determine whether the team in possession takes the result of the play or if the down is to be replayed (Rule: 4-2-3).
 - **Example:** First and 10 for Team A at the A-20. A36 has the ball on a running play when an official sounds an inadvertent whistle. When the whistle is sounded, A36 is (a) on the A-12 or (b) on the A-35. **Ruling:** In (a), Team A will obviously ask for a replay of the down rather than accept an eight-yard loss. In (b), Team A will likely accept the result of the play and begin a new series, first and 10 at the A-35.