



To: State Referee Administrators  
State Youth Referee Administrators  
State Directors of Referee Instruction  
State Directors of Referee Assessment  
National Referees, National Assessors  
National Instructors  
State Directors of Coaching

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Subject: **Offside Myths**

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In response to the suggestion that there is “widespread confusion” regarding Law 11 (Offside), the allegation that referees are being inconsistent in applying the requirements of this Law, and the increasing use of phrases like “passive offside,” we would like to offer the following brief explanation to assist in understanding the meaning and application of Law 11.

There is no such thing as “active offside” or “passive offside” despite the common use of these terms, particularly by commentators. They are, at best, merely shorthand phrases coined for easy reference to the two central concepts in Law 11. Unfortunately, as with so many shorthand phrases, they often confuse rather than clarify what needs to be understood. In general, “passive offside” is used to identify an attacker who is in an offside position but not involved in active play, whereas “active offside” is intended to identify an attacker who has become actively involved in play while in an offside position.

Law 11 has two core threads- these are position and offence. The *offside position*, has a well-established meaning and its concept is clear:

- A player is in an offside position if he is nearer his opponent’s goal line than both the ball and the second last opponent
- A player is not in an offside position if:
  - He is in his own half of the field of play
  - He is level with the second last opponent
  - He is level with the last two opponents
- The judgment as to the offside position is determined at the moment the ball is played by a member of the player’s team.

Offside position is factual based on the relative positions of an attacker, the ball, the halfway line, and the second last opponent.

The *offside offence* is, by contrast, a matter of interpretation by the officiating team and, while the concepts are equally clear, some clarification as to how the officials reach their decision is offered:

- Being in an offside position is not an offence in itself.
- A player in an offside position is only penalized if, at the moment the ball is played or touched by a teammate, he is involved in the active play by *interfering with the play, interfering with an opponent or gaining an advantage by being in that position.*
- A player who receives the ball directly from a goal kick, throw in or a corner kick has not committed an offside offence.
- A player's offside or onside position at the time the ball is touched or played by a teammate cannot be changed by any subsequent movement of the player, the opponents or the ball, so long as there has been no intervening play of the ball by an opponent. An offside or onside position is based on *where the player is when the player's teammate touches or plays the ball, not where the player becomes actively involved in play.*

There must be a clear understanding that an offside position is decided based on a moment in time – when the ball is touched or played by a teammate – whereas the offside offence is judged from that moment onward. In other words, having in effect taken a snapshot of player positions and frozen their onside or offside positions at that moment, the officials must then judge whether players in offside positions become involved in active play. This involves weighing the direction and speed of the ball, the direction and speed of the player in an offside position, the direction and speed of any teammates coming from onside positions and the position and movement of any opponents relative to players in offside positions.

Although this sounds very complex and perhaps beyond the abilities of mortal men and women, in reality the decision-making process of a properly trained official is smooth and calculated to reach a correct interpretation of each situation. What is important to remember is that match officials take into consideration the whole playing scenario across the entire field from where the play started, factoring in the elapsed time, whereas many observers often only focus on a few players, over a short period of time, based on the direction of play and where it ends up.

How is the determination of “active involvement” made leading to a decision to penalize for offside?

“Interfering with play” means touching or playing the ball last touched or played by a teammate. In this context, touching and playing the ball are considered equivalent actions by the player. At a meeting of the International Football Association Board (IFAB) on 11 August 2005, this point was clarified as follows: “A player in an offside position may be penalized **before** playing or touching the ball if, in the opinion of the referee, no other teammate in an onside position has the opportunity to play the ball.” This clarification means that the player could be penalized immediately rather than having to wait for a physical touch of the ball if, in the opinion of the referee, there was

no teammate in an onside position who could compete for the ball. It follows that, if there were a teammate coming from an onside position who could play the ball legally, it would be necessary to wait to see which player actually got to the ball first.

“Interfering with an opponent” means *preventing* an opponent from playing or being able to play the ball by clearly obstructing the opponent’s line of vision or movement, or by a gesture or movement which *in the opinion of the referee deceives or distracts an opponent*. We also have to remember that:

- Attackers clearly behind a defender do not interfere with them.
- Merely knowing that an opponent is in offside position does not justify a defender claiming that he was interfered with.
- An attacker raising his hand to signify no involvement does not, by itself, constitute an action which “deceives or distracts.” Indeed, in this context, there is no need for an attacker to signal “no involvement” as his involvement can be objectively determined by what he does, not by what he fails to do.

“Gaining an advantage by being in that position” means *playing a ball* that rebounds to him off a goalpost, crossbar, or an opponent, having been in an offside position when that phase of play began. In effect, this particular element is an extension of interfering with play, compounded by the rebound of the ball. In cases where this aspect of law is invoked, confusion sometimes arises from the fact that the attacker in an offside position would not have been penalized for offside if the ball had not rebound to him or her in this passage of play.

The approach taken by most match officials is to wait and see. In these circumstances it may appear that the official is late or slow in signaling the offence, but in reality he or she has taken all the evidence presented to him or her, applied the knowledge and understanding of the criteria and come to a *balanced* decision. This may have included the fact that the player was not initially involved in active play and therefore no signal was given. It is almost universally accepted that, if there is any doubt, then the balance of doubt is given to the attacker.

We have addressed the specific instances in separate correspondence. The purpose of this communication is solely to provide an extended discussion of the elements from Law 11 that we have applied in responding to requests for “rulings” regarding specific offside incidents. We also hope that you actively (rather than “passively”) discourage the use of the phrases “passive offside” and “active offside” as they are not part of the Law and only lead to confusion. If you have any points or queries you wish to raise on this paper, please do not hesitate to contact us.