

Clock Officials Cheat Sheet

A quick reference for the game clock operator in Vermont high school football — keep it at the timing table. Confirm anything venue-specific with the Line Judge before kickoff.

The information on this page comes from the San Diego County Football Officials Association's Clock Administration page.

YOU ARE A GAME OFFICIAL

You are part of the officiating crew, not part of the home team. Stay impartial, stay off your phone, and watch the field on every play. A single second added or lost can decide the game, so start and stop the clock the instant you see the signal — no lag, no anticipating.

BEFORE THE GAME — MEET THE LINE JUDGE 30 MINUTES OUT

The **Line Judge** is your contact for the whole game, and he is also the crew's on-field backup clock — if the scoreboard fails, he is the one running the time. (If you are running the *play* clock instead, your contact is the **Back Judge**, or the Referee in a crew of four. Two clocks, two operators, two contacts.) Meet at the timing table at least 30 minutes before kickoff and cover:

- Set the scoreboard clock to the correct time and sync it with the Line Judge's watch. Inside 30 minutes, put the countdown to kickoff on the clock.
- Test the clock. Prove it starts, stops, and resets.
- **Turn the auto horn off.** If the scoreboard sounds a horn at the end of a period it must never fire while a play is in progress.
- Tell the officials where you will be — press box or sideline — and agree on how they will reach you. Test that too.
- Walk through starting, stopping, and adjusting the clock, and the plan if the clock fails.

PREGAME AND HALFTIME TIMING

- The field clock normally starts **30 minutes before** kickoff, and all pregame activity runs off it.
- Captains are called for the coin toss at **3:00** on the countdown by the NFHS manual's default; the state association may set a different time. Everything except the National Anthem should be finished by then.
- **Halftime** starts on the Referee's signal as players and officials leave the field. Confirm the length with the Referee: usually 15 minutes, or 20 for homecoming.
- When the intermission expires, immediately put the mandatory **3-minute warm-up** on the clock and start it.

THE TWO SIGNALS THAT MATTER MOST

Wind — start the clock now. The Referee rotates an arm in a circle at his side. Start it the moment you see it — after a first down he often gives this **with no whistle at all**, so watch him, don't listen for him.

Chop (or no signal) — wait. The clock starts on the snap. Do not start it when the ball is spotted or when the Referee signals ready-for-play. Start it the instant the ball is snapped.

STOP THE CLOCK FOR ANY OF THESE

- Incomplete pass
- End of any kick
- Any score
- Touchback
- Ball dead out of bounds
- Change of possession
- Fair catch
- Inadvertent whistle
- First down (clock may restart on the Referee's wind)
- Team timeout
- Officials' timeout

Any official can signal timeout, not just the Referee. Keep an eye on all of them.

FOUR RULES PEOPLE GET WRONG

- **Free kicks:** never start the clock on the kick itself. The nearest official signals when a player legally touches the ball — start it then.

- **The try (PAT) is not timed.** Leave the clock stopped.
- **Untimed downs:** when a period is extended, leave the clock sitting at **0:00**.
- **End of period:** do not reset for the next period until the Referee declares it over by facing the press box and holding the ball overhead.

RUNNING CLOCK

A running clock exists only where the state association has adopted one (3-1-2). If the Referee or Line Judge tells you from the field to **run the clock**, it stops only for **timeouts and scores** — keep it running regardless of any other signal from the field.

WHEN DOES THE CLOCK RESTART?

Each row assumes nothing else happened on the play that also stops the clock. Periods that begin with a free kick follow the free-kick rule, not the snap.

What the labels mean:

- **START NOW** — start the clock the moment you see the Referee's signal.
- **ON THE SNAP / ON THE FREE KICK** — do nothing yet; wait for the snap or the kick.
- **KEEP RUNNING / STAYS STOPPED / NOT USED** — no action; the clock is already where it belongs.

NORMAL RUNNING PLAYS AND PASSES

After this happens...	Restart the game clock on...	Referee's signal
Ball dead inbounds, no first down	KEEP RUNNING — never stopped	none
Ball dead out of bounds	ON THE SNAP	none
Incomplete pass	ON THE SNAP	none

FIRST DOWNS

After this happens...	Restart the game clock on...	Referee's signal
First down, ball dead in-bounds	START NOW — on the wind	Wind (often silent)
First down, ball dead out of bounds	ON THE SNAP	none

ADMINISTRATIVE STOPPAGES

After this happens...	Restart the game clock on...	Referee's signal
Penalty administered	START NOW — on ready-for-play	Wind
Injury, or helmet comes off	START NOW — on ready-for-play	Wind
Measurement	START NOW — on ready-for-play	Wind
Inadvertent whistle, period extension, other	START NOW — on ready-for-play	Wind

CHANGES OF POSSESSION AND TIMEOUTS

After this happens...	Restart the game clock on...	Referee's signal
Change of possession — Team B will snap	ON THE SNAP	Chop
Double change of possession — Team A snaps	START NOW — on ready-for-play	Wind
Charged team timeout	ON THE SNAP	Chop

KICKS, SCORES AND PERIOD STARTS

After this happens...	Restart the game clock on...	Referee's signal
Legal scrimmage kick (punt) ends	ON THE SNAP	Chop
Touchdown	STAYS STOPPED — through the try	Chop

After this happens...	Restart the game clock on...	Referee's signal
Try, field goal or safety — free kick follows	ON THE FREE KICK — when legally touched	Chop
Start of a period beginning with a snap	ON THE SNAP	Chop
Start of an overtime period	NOT USED — in overtime	Chop

SIGNALS TO KNOW

Signal	What it looks like	Your action
Stop the clock	Both arms straight overhead, hands crossing back and forth.	Stop
Wind	One arm rotating forward in a circle at the side.	Start now
Incomplete pass	Arms swept flat side to side, low in front of the body.	Stop
Touchdown / field goal	Both arms straight up, palms in.	Stop
Dead ball	One arm held straight up for two to three seconds — the play simply ended inbounds.	No action

The Line Judge will demonstrate these before the game. Ask about any you are unsure of.

IF THE CLOCK FAILS

- Signal the officials right away. The **Line Judge takes over timing on the field** and his watch becomes the official clock.
- The Line Judge will have told you the exact failure procedure in the pregame meeting. Follow it.
- If the clock is repaired mid-period, **do not put it back in use** until the next period, or until the Referee decides it is reliable.
- Ask the PA announcer to tell the crowd the field clock is not official, and to announce again when it is back in use.

A NOTE ON THE PLAY CLOCK

Your only job is the game clock. Unless the Line Judge tells you otherwise in the pregame, the 25/40-second play clock is kept on the field by an official — not by you, and not on the scoreboard. If you see the Referee pump an open palm overhead, that resets the play clock and does not concern you.

IF YOU ARE UNSURE

Never guess, and never let a coach, a parent, or the press box talk you into a correction. Get the Line Judge's attention and let the crew sort it out — every clock adjustment comes from the Referee.

Reflects the 2026 NFHS rules year. Built from the San Diego County Football Officials Association's Clock Administration page, reconciled against the 2026 and 2027 NFHS Football Game Officials Manual §1.6 Timers (pp. 26–28). Last checked September 2, 2026. Confirm with the association before relying on this.