

Pregame Practice Card 2026

The 2026 pregame list, one item at a time: who talks to whom, what to ask out loud, the signal to use, and the quick answer to the scenarios that go wrong. Bring it to pregame practice and mark it up.

Associations amend these — check Vermont's guidance before teaching it. See also Pregame Conference. **R** Referee · **U** Umpire · **HL** Head Line Judge · **LJ** Line Judge · **BJ** Back Judge · **K** kicking team · **R-team** receivers · wings are HL and LJ · **S#** is the press-box signal number.

SIGNALS THE WHOLE CREW USES

Eye contact first, hold it two seconds, then drop it. Mirror every time-out.

Signal	Motion
11 players	Fist straight out, elbow straight. R and U punch up to confirm
Unbalanced line	One hand to the cheek: recount before deciding who is eligible
Receiver off the line	Arm out into the backfield, palm to the field. Wings punch it back when the widest man on their side is off the line. Also the backward pass signal, with a yell of "back"
Double sticks	Arms crossed on the chest: more than 10 needed, don't stop the clock at the back stake
Start on ready / on the snap	Index finger rotated / wrists crossed at the waist
Stop sign	Arm out at 90° to R: injury, coach, timer, any delay
Two-minute reminder	Tap the wrist at shoulder level, each play
Last five seconds of play clock	Hand up, count 4-3-2-1. Reset: S17 (both hands = 40). Interrupted is always 25

PRE-GAME DUTIES

R and U with the head coaches, home first.

- **Ask the coach:** get-back coach · captains' numbers · what he wants if he wins the toss · QB's throwing arm · punter's and kicker's foot (R's spot depends on them) · trick plays, onside tendency · where the trainer is, the lightning plan.
- **He must say:** players are legally equipped · who requests time-outs · who accepts or declines penalties. **Tell him:** toss time, and the 3-minute warm-up after the half.
- **Ask the crew:** who initials and keeps the game balls (U)? Who meets the chain crew (HL), the game-clock timer (R & BJ), the play-clock operator (BJ; R in a crew of 4)? Ball helpers? What does "start on the ready" look like to the timer?
- Chain crew takes instruction **only from HL**. Chains on the side opposite the press box.

COIN TOSS

Meet at midfield for the anthem · toss atleast 3 minutes. Prefer 5

- U on the chain sideline, R opposite. BJ chain-side hash, LJ the opposite hash, HL on his sideline. R and U walk the captains out.
- R: introductions, who calls it, toss, **catch it**, captain repeats the call, U repeats it. Option made: **defer** and signal the press box, or **choose**, turn the captains, signal.
- **Second half:** one captain each, secure the options, signal. A **penalty carried over** from the first half is enforced on the second-half kickoff: explain it to both captains with the options.

FREE KICKS

R collects every arm, then the ready.

- **Count:** R and both wings count R-team. U and BJ count K. Eleven each, and **four on each side of the kicker**. Raise an arm when your count is good and your area is clear. R doesn't whistle until everyone signals ready.
- **K's line:** BJ (or HL in a crew of 4) holds the ball until K has 11, tells the kicker to wait for the whistle, and notes nobody but the kicker is more than 5 yards back.
- **Clock:** Wings and R winds it, on the first legal touch.

- **Onside:** bag in hand, restraining line is a plane. **Bag K's first touching** (S16). Kill the ball if a prone player from either team recovers. Never signal that a short kick is expected. If a coach says in pregame his team kicks short, use the short alignment every time.
- **Out of bounds, untouched by R:** flag it (5). R chooses: rekick after 5 back, 5 yards from the succeeding spot, or the ball 25 yards beyond the previous (35 yard line). spot (only if that spot is on the mid-field side of R's 25). The wing presents it to the head coach. Clock never started.
- **Blocks:** below the waist S40, in the back S43, holding S42, blind side S26. **Reverse:** watch forward hand-offs (S35).
- **KCI S33:** bag the **spot**. **Fair catch:** the ball is dead when *any* R-team player catches it. Invalid signal S32. **Momentum** inside the 5: bag the catch. **Touchback S7:** whistle repeatedly.
- **After a safety:** K's 20, a punt is legal, nothing scores. Different alignment. Walk it.
- **Ask:** whose sideline do I own? Who has the kick that carries into the end zone? Who bags the spot, and who tells R?

SCRIMMAGE PLAYS, GENERAL

Count, check, signal, then eyes to your keys.

- **Counts:** R and U counts A, and U checks A's linemen and numbers. BJ counts B. Wings check their side of the line and punch back if the widest man is off it.
- **Substitutions:** wings get subs off on their sideline. A's subs are R's. B's are BJ's (U's in a crew of 4). Twelve confirmed before the snap is a **dead-ball S22** on the snap.
- **Linemen:** five numbered 50–79. U checks. Wings: is the widest man on the line or off it? Off: punch back. Unbalanced: hand to the cheek, recount.
- **Man in motion:** legality belongs to the official he is moving *away from*, even if he comes back. One man, not toward B's goal, every-one set for one full second (S20).
- **Dead-ball fouls:** ENC S18, FST S19, delay S21: no options. U watches the snapper from first touch to the snap.
- **Ask:** who counts and when do we re-count a shift? Who has motion toward my sideline?

RUNNING PLAYS

Swivel twice. The foul usually comes after the whistle.

- **Handoff:** R has the QB through it, then the wings and U?BJ take the runner.
- **Backward pass:** signal, bag it beyond the neutral zone.
- **Progress:** wings mark with the downfield foot and square off. Spot belongs to the one who sees the ball. Backside wing comes in to the hash.
- **Out of bounds:** wing stops the clock twice *immediately*, everyone mirrors.
- **Goal line:** wings stand on it before the ball. Eye contact before any touchdown signal: nobody mirrors. **U never signals a touchdown**, he tells the wing. **Find the ball first.** An incomplete or a no-score comes out at once.
- **Backed up:** R drops to the end line, wings own the goal line. Confirm in pregame.
- **Fumbles:** bag at the yard line. Closest official digs (call "I've got the ball, everyone off"). Next nearest watches conduct. Farthest stops the clock. Four or fewer: eye contact, "I've got red ball", both signal.
- **Ask:** who goes to the goal line and who stays? Who has the clean-up behind the Umpire?

PASSING PLAYS

Watch the ball's first move, then the players. Stop and look at the moment of judgment.

- **Passer:** R keeps his eyes on the passer after release, yells "ball's away". Roughing S34. Wide and deep so a pocket doesn't move him.
- **Behind or beyond the line:** R memorizes the release spot and checks with U. **Say it out loud** before anyone signals.

- **Pass or fumble, forward or back:** R rules a hit passer. In question, **forward pass**. Clarify with your partner first.
- **Intentional grounding** S36 (5 + loss of down): get together. Passer outside the free-blocking zone may throw it to or past the line. Spike right after a clean snap is legal.
- **Eligibles:** ineligible downfield S37 (5, replay). Illegal touching S16 (5 + loss of down).
- **Coverage:** BJ the widest receiver on the strong side. Each wing the inside receiver on his side. Flat or bubble: stay home. Short: down five and stop. Long: turn and burn. Crew of 4: every receiver on your side, dual coverage in the middle.
- **PI** S33 beyond the neutral zone only, on a pass that crosses it untouched. The covering official flags. OPI and DPI on one play: get together.
- **Screens:** stay home. A screen caught behind the line and tackled there is previous-spot, not a tack-on. **Momentum / interception:** no bag for the pick, but bag the catch inside the 5. Covering official signals the new direction.
- **Ask:** who owns the middle in a crew of 4? Who has the end line?

PUNTS

Opposite wings do different jobs at the snap.

- **Wings:** HL holds the line until the kick crosses, and rules whether it did. LJ releases at the snap and works the space ahead of the receivers. The pregame list says the LJ stays; the manual says the HL. **Settle it, wings opposite.**
- **R:** behind the kicker on the **kicking-leg side**. Tell the receivers to stay off the center and punter. Run-into S30. Stay with the kicker until there is no threat.
- **Deep official** (BJ; LJ in a crew of 4) has all deep receivers, fair catch, goal line, momentum, touchback. **Bag where the kick ends**, plus first touching. Kick blocked or touched on the line: locate the ball, beyond or behind.
- **After the kick:** cover blocks ahead of the returner (BBW, BSB, run-back). Tell R-team to stay off the center (snapper protection, rolling fists). K is exempt from 50-79 numbering: note the number, watch the fake.
- **Ask:** who covers the receivers' blocks on my side? Who calls a kick-catch interference spot and who bags it?

FIELD GOALS AND TRIES

Hold your whistles on a field goal. A blocked try is dead at once.

- **Posts (crew of 5):** U and BJ behind the uprights. BJ also rules the crossbar and sounds the whistle. **Crew of 4:** LJ is sole judge outside R's 15 (R echoes it). Inside the 15, LJ runs to the end line and rules the crossbar, thumbs up to R; R rules the uprights.
- **Wings:** rule whether the kick crossed the neutral zone, and help on ineligibles on a fake. R stays with the kicker and holder, then **relays** the deep signal (S5) to the press box.
- **Run or pass try:** live ball. Nobody charges the snapper. A blocked or touched kick: locate the ball, beyond or behind the line.
- **Ask:** who rules the crossbar? Who has the center? If R-team recovers a blocked kick, who has the runner?

MEASUREMENTS AND REPORTING

- **Measure:** close means measure. Wings know the line to gain before the snap. Near the end of a half or game, stop the clock to measure. Signal the first down (S8) once. Chain comes in with the HL's hands on the links, LJ marks, U pulls the front rod, R rules.
- **Reporting:** calling official stops the clock, tells R **who, what, when, where, result**. No preliminary from the wing. Two flags: get together. Offense and defense, never jersey colors.
- **Options:** R gets the decision from the head coach as fast as possible, with the wing present. **FST, ENC, delay: no options.**
- **Enforcing:** U walks it in the field, HL on the sideline, LJ holds the spot. Wing tells the coach the number, in words. Never guess a number.

TIMING AND GAME DUTIES

The play clock is not a race.

- **Game clock** is the LJ's: pre-game talk with the timer, backup count, halftime, malfunction. **Play clock** is the BJ's (R in a crew of 4). The

- covering official winds or stops it and R mirrors. If it fails to start, everybody signals.
- **Malfunction:** announce time at 9, 6, 4 and 2 minutes, and after each play inside 2.
- **Time-outs:** all record them. Tell the coach when he has none.
- **Fumble pile-up:** stop the clock after two seconds and dig. Say the team color, whose ball, then signal.
- **First down inbounds:** U stands on the ball until R winds the clock.

END OF QUARTER, HALF, AND OVERTIME

- **1st and 3rd:** record the down, spot and yard line, then the teams change ends.
- **Last two minutes:** who is watching the scoreboard? One official sees it stop.
- **Overtime:** 3 minutes after regulation, **one time-out each per period**, tell the head coach. Toss and options. Enforcements carry over: talk to the coach. State procedure rules, so confirm Vermont's.

GAME CONTROL

- Wings own the sidelines and benches, and the get-back coach. Agree what is out of line, so we have **one standard**. Sideline warning S15, then penalty.
- **Tempers:** no talking between opponents, penalize the first late hit, don't push or grab, huddle after.
- **Ask:** who watches the media and fans? Who talks to the visiting coach?
- **Crew discussion before you go out:** rule or level differences · hurry-up · an obvious onside kick · lightning · a fight · an injured official (4 carries on without the LJ, 5 without the BJ) · halftime: who tells teams the time · leaving together · history between these two schools.

SCENARIOS, QUICK ANSWERS

You see	Do this
Free kick rolls out untouched	Flag. R-team picks one of the 3 options. Wing presents
K touches it before it crosses R's line	Bag S16. R-team may take it there unless R fouls
Fair-catch signal, then K touches R-team	KCI S33, 15. Result, awarded catch or replay. Bag the spot
R-team holds beyond the expanded neutral zone while a punt is in flight	Post-scrimmage kick: enforce from the end of the kick, R-team keeps the ball
Punter hit	S30. Wing gives options: take the penalty or decline the field position
Catch at the 3, carried into the end zone	Ball at the spot of the catch. When in question: touchback
Passer hit as he lets go	In question, forward pass. R rules, partner agrees
Two flags on one down	Get together. Never signal from the wing
Twelve counted	Before the snap: whistle, dead-ball S22. After: live ball
Man in motion toward the goal line	Illegal motion S20. The official he is leaving owns it
Defensive live-ball foul on a touchdown	Scoring team chooses: enforce on the try or on the kickoff
Tied at the end	3-minute intermission, toss, one time-out each, 10-yard line
Coach says you misapplied a rule	Conference only for rules, not judgment. R listens, wing present, books on the field

Reflects the 2026 NFHS rules year. Built from the association's 2026 Referee Pregame Conference topic list and this site's crew cards. Last checked October 9, 2026. Confirm with the association before relying on this.