

# Football Terms

**AUDIBLE:** An audible is a play called by the quarterback at the line of scrimmage which changes the play that was previously called in the huddle; a change of plans in game play, just before the ball goes into play.

**BALANCED LINE:** A formation with an equal number of linemen on either side of the center.

**BLIND SIDE:** The side opposite the side the player is looking towards.

**BLITZ:** An all-out run by linebackers and defensive backs, charging through the offensive line in an effort to sack the quarterback before he can hand off the ball, or pass it.

**BOOTLEG:** The quarterback fakes a hand-off to backs going one way while goes the other way to run or pass

**BLOCK:** To contact your opponent, with any part of the body. There are various types of blocks, such as the basic block, the shoulder block, the scramble or reach block, and pass

**BUTTONHOOK:** A pass route in which the receiver heads straight downfield, then abruptly turns back toward the line of scrimmage.

**CENTER:** An offensive line position at the center of the line of scrimmage. The center snaps the ball to the quarterback or punter.

**CHAIN GANG:** Three assistants to the officials whose job it is to handle the first down measuring chain and the down box.

**CHOP BLOCK:** A delayed block at the knees or below against an opponent who is in contact with a teammate of the blocker.

**CLIPPING:** Blocking an opponent from behind, typically at leg level. Clipping is a foul, with a 15-yard penalty.

**COIN TOSS:** Before the start of the game, the quarterback of the visiting team calls heads or tails of a coin flipped by the referee. The winning team kicks off; the loser chooses which goal to defend.

**COMPLETION:** A legally caught pass.

**CORNERBACK:** A defensive backfield player, almost as deep into the backfield as the safety. There are two cornerbacks. Their job is to tackle runners and intercept passes.

**COVER:** To defend a position or location on the field.

**CURL/CURL IN:** A maneuver where the receiver runs downfield before turning back to run towards the line of scrimmage.

**CUT:** To suddenly change direction to lose a pursuing player.

**DEAD BALL:** A ball that is no longer in play, that is, a ball that is not held by a player or loose from a kick, fumble, or pass.

**DEFENSE:** The team defending their goal line. The defense does not have the ball; rather, they attempt to keep the offense from passing or running the ball over their (the defense's) goal line.

**DEFENSIVE BACKFIELD:** The area or players behind the defensive linemen. The defensive backfield is the last line of defense against the offense. There are two safeties, two cornerbacks, and three or four linebackers in the defensive backfield.

**DEFENSIVE LINEMEN:** The players whose job it is to rush the quarterback in an effort to sack him, or, if another player has the ball, to block him and prevent the opposing team from gaining yardage.

**DELAY OF GAME:** A delay caused by a team using or requesting excessive time-outs, given a 5 yard penalty.

**DOWN:** An offensive play, starting with a center snap and ending when the ball is dead. The offense gets four downs to gain ten yards. If they gain that before using all four downs, they get a first down and another four downs to gain another ten yards. Each time they gain ten yards, the team is at their first down again, needing another ten yards (first and ten) within the next four downs, or plays.

**DOWN AND IN:** A maneuver where the receiver runs straight downfield, then suddenly cuts toward the middle of the field.

**DOWN AND OUT:** The opposite of the above maneuver. In a down and out, the receiver runs downfield then turns out, toward the sideline.

**DOWN BOX (DOWN INDICATOR):** A seven-foot metal rod, on the end of which are four cards (numbered 1 to 4), used to keep track of the number of the down being played.

**DRAFT:** The selection of new players into the pro ranks. Teams doing poorly are allowed to choose before those doing well, from among the various top college players.

**DRAW PLAY:** A fake pass which ends with one of the backs carrying the ball after the defensive linemen are "drawn" in on the pass rush

**ELIGIBLE:** An offensive player who is able (by the rules) to catch a forward pass; eligible to receive the pass.

**ENCROACH:** Contacting an opposing player before the snap. Encroaching is illegal, with a five-yard penalty.

**END:** An offensive lineman on the very end of the line of scrimmage (there are two, one on each end of the line). The ends block defensive linemen to open up holes for the runner, and guard the quarterback. On professional teams, the end on the right side is referred to as a 'tight' end, as he lines up close to the tackle. The end on the left side is out farther to go out for passes, and is called a wide receiver.

**END LINE:** The very end of the field, in either direction. There are two end lines (one at each end of the field).

**END ZONE:** The area between the goal lines and the end lines; the last ten yards at either end of the field.

**EXTRA POINTS:** After scoring a touchdown, a team can earn one more point by making a successful place-kick.

**FAIR CATCH:** When there is a punt, and a receiver is going to catch the ball and signals that he will not advance after catching it (by raising his hand just before the catch), this is a fair catch. Also, players may not tackle the receiver making the fair catch.

**FIELD GOAL:** When a place-kick goes through the goalpost (over the crossbar and between the upright bars), three points are earned as a field goal.

**FIELD POSITION:** The ball's location on the field.

**FLANKER:** An offensive player on the right or left side of the formation. A flanker usually plays as a receiver and is split out wider than a wingback.

**FORMATION:** The arrangement of the players at the beginning of each play.

**FORWARD PASS:** Throwing of the ball "forward", or in the direction of advancement (towards the opponents' goal).

**FOUL:** A breaking of the rules. Common fouls are holding (grasping an opponent, unless the opponent has the ball), personal fouls (tripping an opponent or striking an opponent with one's hand, knee, or head), interference (a defensive player contacting a receiver to stop the completion of a pass or kick by contacting the player before he has the ball), clipping (pushing an opponent in the back), and face mask (grabbing an opponent's face mask).

**FREE SAFETY:** One of the two defensive backs deepest in the field who isn't assigned a particular area or player to cover and is thus "free" to follow the play anywhere it goes and generally must be a solid pass defender. Also, see Strong Safety.

**FREEZE:** Holding onto the ball for along time without scoring or attempting to score, to freeze the ball.

**FRONT FOUR:** The players defensive front line; made up of two ends and two tackles.

**FULLBACK:** A member of the offense, whose job it is to block for the halfback and quarterback, but he also runs the ball, and receives passes. The name derives from the fact that in an I formation the Fullback is the furthest back, or a full way back. See quarterback and halfback to further clarify.

**FUMBLE:** A ball that is dropped while in play.

**GAME BALL:** The ball given to a winning team's player or coach considered to have most contribution to their win (supposed to be the ball or a ball the game was played with).

**GOAL LINE:** The line over which the ball must pass to score a touchdown. There are two, one at each end of the field, ten yards from the ends of the field.

**GOAL-LINE STAND:** Making a stand against the opposition at or near one's goal-line in a very tough defensive effort.

**GRIDIRON:** A football field.

**GUARD:** An offensive lineman. There are two guards, one on either side of the center, whose job it is to guard the quarterback.

**HAIL MARY:** The quarterback throwing the ball up in the air without really targeting any particular receiver, hoping someone on his side catches it. Typically done when the quarterback's about to get sacked!

**HANG TIME:** The time a punt remains in the air.

**HALFBACK:** Also referred to as Tailback or Running back. A member of the offense, whose job it is to run the ball, receive passes, and block for a teammate running the ball. The name derives from the fact that in an I formation the Halfback is half way between the Quarterback and the Fullback, or half the way back. See Quarterback and Fullback to further clarify.

**HAND OFF:** Quite literally what it says: to hand the ball off to a teammate.

**HASH MARKS:** These marks divide the field into thirds. Whenever the ball becomes dead on or outside one of these marks, it is placed on its respective hash mark.

**HITCH AND GO:** A maneuver where a runner goes downfield to catch a pass, fakes a quick turn (as if to catch), then continues downfield for a deeper pass.

**HOLDER:** The player who holds the ball during a place kick.

**HOLDING:** Keeping another player from advancing by literally holding him back with one's hand(s). Usually illegal.

**HUDDLE:** The action of the players grouping together to plan the next play(s). As a noun, the group itself.

**ILLEGAL MOTION:** Movement by an offensive player before the snap. Illegal motion is, obviously, illegal, and gets a five-yard penalty.

**ILLEGAL PROCEDURE:** Used to indicate a number of infractions, including an illegal snap, having less than seven players on the offense's line of scrimmage, and taking more than two steps after making a fair catch.

**INCOMPLETE:** A forward pass that is not caught or intercepted.

**INTENTIONAL GROUNDING:** The quarterback purposefully throwing the ball out of bounds or into the ground to avoid throwing a bad pass (which might be intercepted). Intentional grounding can be difficult to call, but a referee may assign the offending team a five yard penalty and the lose of their down!.

**INTERCEPTION:** The catching of a forward pass by the defense (this turns the defense suddenly into the offense).

**INTERFERENCE:** There is offensive interference, when blockers run in front of a running back, and defensive interference (or defensive pass interference), when a pass defender interferes with a receiver trying to catch the ball while the defender could not catch the ball himself (intercept). For example, a defender with his back to the ball who sees the receiver he's covering readying to catch the ball and then waves his arms in front of the receiver to distract him is interfering with the pass. Defense interference is an infraction of the rules.

**KICK:** Attempting to score a point or field goal after touchdown by kicking the ball.

**KICKING GAME:** The game strategy revolving around punting and place-kicking.

**KICKOFF:** The kicking team (determined by the winner of the coin toss) kicks the ball from the free kick line (the 35-yard line in pro football, the 40-yard line in high school and college). This is the kickoff, the start of the game.

**LATERAL:** As a forward pass, but not thrown in the direction of the opponents' goalpost. Rather, the ball is thrown in any direction other than towards the opponents' goal.

**LINEBACKER:** Defensive players placed behind the defensive linemen. Their job is to tackle runners and block or intercept passes. There are three or four linebackers.

**LINE JUDGE:** An official who keeps track of time and also watches for various violations, including the quarterback's position when passing (the quarterback isn't allowed to go past the line of scrimmage to pass).

**LINEMEN:** The players on the forward line (see offensive linemen and defensive linemen).

**LINE OF SCRIMMAGE:** Before each play, a set of two imaginary lines are used to determine where the players will line up. These are the lines of scrimmage, and pass through each tip of the ball, running parallel to the goal lines.

**LIVE BALL:** Opposite of a ball that is dead. A live ball is either loose as a result of a kick, fumble, or pass, or is held by a player.

**MAN IN MOTION:** The player who turns and runs behind the line of scrimmage, parallel to it, as the signals are called. He then runs downfield just as the ball is snapped.

**MAN TO MAN DEFENSE:** Covering each member of the offense with a member of the defense. Also called player-to-player defense. See zone defense also.

**MIDDLE GUARD:** The defensive lineman positioned between the tackles, opposite the offensive center. Also called the nose guard.

**MULTIPLE OFFENSE:** Offense strategy using a number of formations.

**NICKEL DEFENSE:** A defensive formation involving five defensive backs

**OFFENSE:** The team with the ball; the offense attempts to run or pass the ball across the defense's goal line.

**OFFENSIVE BACKFIELD:** The area or players behind the offensive linemen. These are the running backs, the quarterback, and a second wide receiver. See also Offensive Linemen, below.

**OFFENSIVE LINEMEN:** Seven players, made up of the center, two guards, two ends, and two tackles.

**OFFICIAL:** One who supervises the game and interprets the rules.

**OFFSIDE:** When a player is over the line of scrimmage (on the opposing team's side) before the ball is snapped.

**ON-SIDE KICK:** A short kick (though at least 10 yards), with the plan being to recover the kick and thus gain some yardage.

**OPTION PLAY:** An offensive play wherein the player with the ball has the option of running or passing.

**OVERTIME:** The game goes into overtime to break a tie. In pro ball, the first team to score into overtime wins. This is known as the "sudden death" system.

**PASSING GAME:** The offensive strategy dealing with throwing the ball and receiving forward passes.

**PASS PATTERN:** The specific route run by a receiver to catch a pass.

**PASS RUSH:** The rush by the defense to try and tackle the quarterback before he can complete a pass.

**PENALTY:** Punishment for a foul. Can consist of losing a down or even the ball, but usually sets back the penalized team five to fifteen yards.

**PILING ON:** Several players jumping on the player with the ball after he's been tackled. Also called dogpiling. Piling on is illegal, with a 15 yard penalty.

**PLACE-KICK:** A kick made while the ball is held in place on the ground (either with a tee or by another player).

**PLAY ACTION:** A passing play set up to draw the Defensive Linebackers towards the Line Of Scrimmage with a Run Fake.

**PLAYMAKER:** One skilled in helping their team score with winning strategy.

**POCKET:** The area the quarterback sets up his pass from. Guarded against the opposition to hopefully form a safe "pocket".

**POINT AFTER TOUCHDOWN:** After scoring a touchdown, a team may score an extra point for a successful place kick through the opposition's goal post.

**POINT SPREAD:** The projected difference in scores between two teams about to play.

**POST PATTERN:** A pass pattern where the receiver runs 10-15 yards downfield before turning towards

**PRIMARY:** The receiver who was chosen by the quarterback in the huddle to receive the ball.

**PUMP FAKE:** When the Quarterback draws his arm back and fakes a forward pass to draw the Free Safety to an area or cause a Defensive Back to pause in his coverage of a Wide Receiver.

**PUNT:** When the ball is dropped from the kicker's hands and kicked before hitting the ground.

**PUNT RETURN:** The runback of the ball after it's been punted.

**QUARTERBACK:** An member of the offense. The quarterback takes the snap from the center, then either passes, hands off, or runs with the ball. The name derives from the fact that in an I formation the Quarterback is half as far back as the Halfback, or a quarter the way back. See Fullback and Halfback to further clarify.

**QUARTERBACK SNEAK:** An play wherein the quarterback receives the ball after the snap and immediately runs forward through the opposition, with his own team blocking for him.

**QUICK KICK:** A surprise punt.

**RECEIVER:** A receiver, or pass receiver, is a member of the offense whose job it is to get into the open to catch a pass from the quarterback and then run with the ball. Additionally, in professional football, the end on the left is referred to as a 'wide' receiver.

**RECOVER:** Grabbing a ball that has been fumbled (whether the recovering player's side initially had the ball or not).

**RETURNER:** A player who runs back kickoffs and punts.

**REVERSE:** An offensive play In a reverse, the player with the ball runs in one direction, then hands off the ball to another player going the opposite direction, reversing the ball's direction of travel.

**ROLL:** The quarterback rolls when he moves left or right with the ball before throwing it.

**ROSTER:** A list of the members of a team.

**ROUGHING:** A personal foul with a 15 yard penalty. Called when a player illegally contacts another player, as in roughing the punter, when a player tackles the punter without touching the ball, or roughing the passer, where a defensive player attempts to tackle the quarterback after the ball has been thrown.

**RUNBACK:** Returning a kickoff, punt, or interception.

**RUNNING BACK:** Positioned behind the quarterback, there are two running backs, whose job it is to run with the ball, which is typically handed off by the quarterback. Part of the offensive backfield. In college and high school football, there are halfbacks and fullbacks in these positions, but in professional football they are simply the two running backs.

**RUSH:** To run from the scrimmage line with the ball.

**SACK:** Tackling the quarterback before he can throw a pass.

**SAFETY:** When a team forces the opposition to down the ball in their own end zone, they receive two points, called a safety. Also, the player position called safety is a defensive backfield position, the deepest in the backfield. There are two safeties, see Strong Safety and Free Safety.

**SAFETY BLITZ:** A charge by one or both safeties in an attempt to tackle the quarterback.

**SAFETY VALVE:** A short pass thrown to a running back when the wide receivers are covered.

**SCRAMBLE:** When a quarterback runs behind the line of scrimmage lose tacklers.

**SCRAMBLER:** A quarterback whose gotten a reputation for scrambling.

**SCREEN PASS:** A pass from behind the line of scrimmage, after a deep drop by the Quarterback. It's a play that allows the rushers to charge through as the offensive linemen fake block them, only to set up a wall for a receiver, or runningback to catch the pass and run behind.

**SCRIMMAGE:** The action between two teams, starting when the ball is snapped.

**SECONDARY:** The defensive backfield, or second line of defense.

**SHIFT:** The movement of two (or more) offensive players between positions.

**SLANT:** Running, with the ball, at an angle.

**SLOT:** A gap in the offensive line between a receiver and a tackle.

**SNAP:** The handing of the ball by the center, reaching back between his legs, to the quarterback or punter.

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** A special group, or "platoon", of players specializing in one particular maneuver, such as punts or kick-offs. When the maneuver is about to be done, the coach will substitute the special team.

Special teams give their all to their specialties and consequently suffer higher injury rates than the rest of the team. That's why they are also called bomb squads or suicide squads.

**SPIRAL:** The football's rotation when it's thrown (about it's longitudinal axis).

**SPLIT END:** A receiver who lines up several yards away from the next player along the line of scrimmage.

**SQUARE IN/OUT:** A pass route where the runner goes downfield then turns "in" at a "square" or right angle to the center of the field, or "out" to the sideline.

**SQUIB KICK:** A low flat kickoff that is difficult to handle. It is often used when the receiving team has an effective kick returner or when the kicking team does not have a long ball kicker.

**STRAIGHT ARM:** (Stiff Arm) To defend against player trying to tackle you by using your hand and arm to jab with t a straight stiff arm at the opponents head or chest area to avoid a tackle.

**STRONG SAFETY:**A defensive backfield position, the deepest in the backfield. The Strong Safety is the Safety on the strong side (Tight End side) of the Offense and generally must be a solid tackler. Also, see Free Safety.

**STRONG SIDE:** In an unbalanced line, the side with the most players.

**TACKLE:** To bring down another player, i.e., to sack the quarterback is to tackle him. Also an offensive position. There are two tackles, one outside each guard, whose job is to block the onrushing defensive line and open up holes for a runner.

**TAILBACK:** A member of the offensive backfield, whose job is to run with the ball. Also called a running back or halfback.

**THREE-POINT STANCE:** The position players at the line of scrimmage take before the snap, leaning forward on one hand with their feet spread.

**TIME:** In professional and college football, the game is limited to 60 minutes (48 minutes in high school football). This is divided into two 30 minute halves, each of which is divided into two 15 minute quarters, or "periods." In between the two halves is halftime, which lasts 15 minutes. If the teams are tied at the end of the time limit, the game goes into overtime, continuing until one of the teams pulls ahead.

**TOUCHBACK:** A touchback occurs when the defensive team gains possession of the ball in their own end zone on the same play in which the offensive team caused the ball to cross the goal line.

**TOUCHDOWN:** Carrying the ball into, or catching the ball in, the opposition's end zone. Worth six points.

**TRAP BLOCK:** When a player is allowed through the enemy line only to be blocked by surprise from another player behind the line. Also called a mousetrap.

**TURN IN/OUT:** A pass route where the player runs downfield then turns in toward the middle of the field or out towards the sidelines.

**TURN OVER:** Losing possession of the ball, typically by error.

**UNBALANCED LINE:** A formation with more players on one side of the center than the other.

**UPRIGHTS:** Vertical posts supporting the crossbar in the goalpost.

**WEAK SIDE:** The side of an unbalanced line with the least players.

**YARDAGE:** The amount of yards gained (or lost) during a play.

**ZONE DEFENSE:** A defense strategy where each player has an area, or "zone", of the field to defend.  
See also man-to-man defense.