

NFHS Flag Football Committee Develops First High School Rules

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The NFHS Flag Football Rules Committee met earlier this year in Indianapolis to develop the first national rules for high school flag football. The 2025-26 NFHS Flag Football Rules Book will be available in print and digital form in early May 2025 and will provide rules guidance for the nation's fastest-growing emerging high school sport.

The 11-member committee, which was chaired by Tyler Cerimeli, director of athletics and officials with the Arizona Interscholastic Association, and directed by Bob Colgate, NFHS director of sports and sports medicine and editor of the NFHS Flag Football Rules Book, faced a daunting task of formulating a new rules publication from scratch.

"The committee reviewed various other rules codes in place for flag football, including rules currently used in several state associations," Colgate said. "After much discussion, while the committee decided to use some parts of other rules codes to develop the first NFHS Flag Football Rules Book, the group wanted to develop rules that best fit our game at the high school level."

Colgate said the committee agreed to use the current NFHS Football Rules Book as a starting point, taking out sections not pertaining to flag football and adding those elements specific to the growing sport of flag football.

Two of the key elements of the first NFHS Flag Football Rules Book are the number of players on a team and the size of the field. The first book will feature rules governing the 7-on-7 player game, and will provide options for size of the field, one of which will be a regulation 11-player high school football field.

"The committee feels strongly that 7-on-7 is the most appropriate starting point for high school flag football, while acknowledging the potential for 5-on-5 modifications to be considered in the future," Cerimeli said. "Flag football is seeing tremendous and rapid growth across the country. The committee has created a rules book that we believe will foster that growth and is reflective of the specific needs of high school flag football."

While the NFHS Flag Football Rules Book is being written for both boys and girls competition, the growth of the girls game the past several years drove the urgency for national playing rules.

Currently, 14 state associations have sanctioned girls flag football, another state is voting on sanctioning in April and 18 states are involved in independent/pilot programs at some level. States that have sanctioned the sport for girls include NFHS member associations in Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, Pennsylvania and Tennessee. The Louisiana High School Athletic Association is voting in April to possibly become the 15th state to sanction girls flag football.

State associations with independent/pilot programs include Connecticut, District of Columbia, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin.

And the number of participants in girls flag football more than doubled from 2022-23 to 2023-24. A total of 42,955 girls participated in flag football in 2023-24 compared to 20,875 the previous year – a 105 percent increase.

"The NFHS is excited about this new sports opportunity – particularly for girls," said Dr. Karissa Niehoff, CEO of the NFHS. "Flag is a sport of inclusivity. It can be played in any season (weather dependent), is fast-paced and offers an opportunity for young people to play and others to coach or officiate in the exciting sport of football."

“The popularity of flag football – for boys and girls – has been growing at the youth levels for the past 10 years. In 2023, about 500,000 girls ages 6-17 played flag football – a 63 percent increase since 2019. At a higher level of competition, more universities are beginning to offer flag football for girls, which will certainly enhance the appeal for girls playing the sport at the high school level. And internationally, the sport received a huge boost with the addition of flag football as an Olympic sport for men and women at the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.

“The NFHS looks forward to being involved with the continued growth of flag football in schools nationwide, particularly now with playing rules specifically for the high school game, as more opportunities for participation unfold in all 50 states,” Niehoff concluded.

Flag football is the 18th sport for which the NFHS writes national playing rules and the first new sport offering since boys lacrosse (2000) and girls lacrosse (2016), and the first writing of new rules since publication of the NFHS Spirit Rules Book in 1990. The NFHS – the pre-eminent sports rules-writing organization – began rules writing in the 1930s with football (1932) and basketball (1936). In addition to football, flag football, basketball, boys lacrosse, girls lacrosse and spirit, the NFHS writes playing rules in baseball, cross country, field hockey, girls gymnastics, ice hockey, softball, soccer, swimming and diving, track and field, volleyball, water polo and wrestling.