

Holding

What are your keys?

Bob Masucci
New Jersey Football Officials Association
North Jersey Chapter



Can you really call holding on every play? Should you? What's actually meant by the "point of attack" and how does it figure into whether or not you flag a player for holding? And, most importantly, what are the keys—the decision criteria—you use to determine if you will indeed drop the flag?

This work represents the opinions of the author and possibly others. The principles expressed have been arrived at through years of experience and interviews with other officials at all levels of football. They represent how the rules of football are applied at various levels and in various regions. Each reader must filter this work through his own philosophy and through the standards established by his own local associations and/or conferences. Likewise, it is intended to assist officials in the proper application of NF/NCAA football rules and techniques. It is not the definitive word. Should any information included herein be in conflict with any National Federation publication or any NCAA publication, those documents shall prevail.

“You can call holding on every play.” We’ve all heard it a hundred times. Personally, I don’t believe it. And even if you do believe it, and insist on calling it on every play, you won’t be calling it for very long. Offensive holding is certainly worthy of more discussion. Officials have heard many times that we should only call holding when it occurs at the point of attack, i.e. when it occurs at a place and time that may have an impact on the play. But that’s usually where the discussion ends. In my opinion, that’s exactly where the discussion should begin.

More needs to be said about what actually constitutes holding, what types of actions should be flagged. What are the "keys" you look for when you have a player suspect for holding?

Let’s take a look at the wording of the Federation’s rule (NF 9-2-1c) prohibiting “holding.”

An offensive player (except the runner) shall not...(c.) Use his hands, arms or legs

to hook, lock, clamp, grasp, encircle or hold in an effort to restrain an opponent.

The NCAA rule (NCAA 9-3-3b) is similar:

1. **The hand(s) and arm(s) shall not be used to grasp, pull or encircle in any way that illegally impedes or illegally obstructs an opponent.**
2. **The hand(s) or arm(s) shall not be used to hook, clamp or otherwise illegally impede or illegally obstruct an opponent (A.R. 9-3-3-I).**

I’ve always believed that the operative words in the respective rules are “restrain,” “impede,” and “obstruct.” Unless the act restricts an opponent and prevents him from making a natural move toward the ball carrier (point of attack), I’d be inclined to let it go.

A friend of mine told me what the NFL looks for when a player is suspect for holding at the point of attack: Look for the blockee to make an “unathletic move.” That is, look for him to make a

move that in no way resembles what an athlete might do if he were pursuing a runner in a natural, unrestricted way. Examples: look for his shoulders to spin away from his direction of movement; look for his arm to be pulled away from the side of his body so that his balance is compromised. And the big one...look for the blockee to “lose his legs.” This last one deserves a better description. When an athlete moves, he typically has his body over his legs, which provide balance and a foundation for movement. If a player is restricted by an opponent in a manner such that either his legs are pulled out from under his upper body, or his upper body is held so that his unrestricted legs move out from under him, he has “lost his legs.” In such cases, the action by the blocker has clearly prevented his opponent from moving naturally toward the ball carrier. When such a restriction takes place at or close to the point of attack, you have a hold.

Suppose two opponents are facing off at the line of scrimmage. The offensive player grabs a handful of jersey inside. The two continue to face off as the runner passes by them. The NFL calls this a “dance” and will most likely not flag it if the defender is happy to just stand there in an embrace with his opponent. But, if the defender in this scenario makes a move toward the runner and a real restriction to his movement is obvious, you’ll undoubtedly see a flag.

Many college officials use these principles as well. I personally see no reason why they can’t also be used as your decision criteria in lower levels of football.

This was handed out at a clinic that was given to officials as part of a clinic put on by some Big Ten and NFL officials.

You may find it interesting...

Classification of Holds

- 1) BEAR HUG - Arms surrounding opponent
- 2) WRAP/GRAB & TURN - Hands are on the outside of the shoulders and opponent is actually turned over to one side or the other
- 3) SHOULDER DIP - Player may have hands inside on the chest or outside on the shoulders. When runner passes there is a noticeable dip in the shoulder of the opponent.
- 4) SHIRT STRETCH - Players hand inside on chest - as players disengage there is a clear stretch of the shirt.
- 5) PULLOVER - It looks like player is being run over by the opponent but has grabbed the shirt on the chest and pulled the opponent down on himself.
- 6) GRAB OF LEG - Generally done when the player is on the ground, will reach out and grab the leg.

YOU MUST - Make sure something happens - even if a player attempts to hold but the opponent runs right through his attempt - no foul should be called.

KEYS -

- ADVANTAGE/DISADVANTAGE
- POINT OF ATTACK
- DIRECTION OF RUSHER (is the rusher just dancing with the player or is he actively pursuing the ball)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Bob Masucci is an information technology contracts manager at AT&T in Piscataway, NJ. Residing in Clinton Township, NJ, Bob is a 25-year football official. During those years, he has officiated in 23 state playoff games, including 11 state finals. As an active member of the North Jersey chapter of the New Jersey Football Officials Association, he has participated in the training and mentoring of new officials and has independently developed a wide array training materials.

