

National Federation Tightens Rule on Spearing

Following the lead of the NCAA, the National Federation of State High School Associations is cracking down on head-down contact in football, commonly called spearing.

The NCAA addressed the issue last year after an NATA-led task force recommended changes based, in part, on an NATA position statement on the topic.

In its Jan. 21-22 meeting, the NFHS Football Rules Committee voted to amend its rule regarding spearing. Where previously they defined spearing as an “intentional” use of the helmet to punish an opponent, they now define it as “the use of the helmet in an attempt to punish an opponent.” The removal of the word “intentional” allows officials greater leeway in calling this penalty.

The new rule takes effect with the 2006 season, and Federation officials are hopeful it will reduce the number of head and neck injuries in high school football.

Spearing: The use of the helmet in an attempt to punish an opponent.

athletic trainers' role

The NFHS wants athletic trainers to play a key role in preventing spearing, according to Assistant Director Jerry Diehl. The Federation believes athletic trainers who monitor practice and play from the sidelines are in a good position to notice spearing and point it out to coaches, who can then take steps to correct athletes.

“I think it’s the responsibility of the football coach, of the administrators of a school and the athletic trainers to all work collectively in taking the head out of football,” Diehl said. “This [rule change] is just another way to call attention to the fact that ... [spearing] is not an acceptable practice at any time.”

Diehl said that a review of football officiating practices has found that illegal helmet contact is being penalized, but the penalties are being identified as unnecessary roughness or unsportsmanlike conduct. With the stricter rule against spearing, Federation officials hope referees become more specific in their play-calling to draw attention to the illegal and unsafe practice.

For more information about the National Federation of State High School Associations, visit www.nfhs.org. nn