American football
Basic concepts and rules
In 60 Minutes

Simple, Easy and Fun book for fans of Soccer and Rugby.

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Why Read This Book About Football?

Have you ever wondered what American Football and its rules are all about?

Do you understand the reasons for all the breaks in the game? The reasons the players wear protective gear? The reasons there are many substitutions among players?

If you do not know the answers above then you are reading just the perfect book. There are other books that explain all the detailed rules for Football fans. However, if you are from a country where Soccer or Rugby are the popular games and you never understood American Football, you do not want to get strait into all the complicated rules. Instead, you want to understand the logic, principles and the very basic rules so you could enjoy watching the first few games.

This is what makes this book unique. Read this book first and watch few games. Then, if you are interested to learn more rules you could buy books that will explain you the game in much deeper details.

The truth is that Football is a very sophisticated game with thousands of technical rules. However, the best way to enjoy Football in the beginning is to first focus ONLY on the basic plays. Only later learn about the game step by step.

The book was written by one who understands both the game and also understands Europeans, Australians, Asians, South Africans and South Americans’ attitude towards the game.

The following are few of the things about American Football you will understand after reading this book:

- The basic ideas behind the game and its unique philosophy.
- The basic plays of the game.
- The control of the game.
- The reason for all the breaks in the game and how they actually benefit the game and the audience!
- The unique way of officiating The Game
- The Ball - It appears to be the same as Rugby ball. However, it has some significant differences that affect the way the game is played.
• The reason for all the protection gear that the players wear.

After reading this book you will be watching American Football with excitement.
Note: There are number of different football leagues such as the NFL, College Football, Canadian league, Arena Football, etc. Each one of them has slightly different rules that may change a bit every year. The examples in this book do not represent any specific league.
American Football with over 30 NFL (National Football League) teams and over 100 major college teams is extremely popular sport in the USA.

Still, for many people around the world who play soccer, rugby, basketball and other games it is somewhat confusing that there are many stops in the game, that each player plays only one specific position and that the players wear so many protective gear.

American Football, like any other game, has ultimate goal of scoring points. However, in Football the method of reaching those goals are normally not in one continuously play but rather it is broken down into smaller plays that each has a smaller goal. Then, slowly, step by step, they reach the ultimate goal.

The plays themselves are focused on achieving specific goal. Even that technically it is possible to score points at any given play, most plays are designed to advance the ball only few yards and at times even just few inches.

Understanding this very specific goal for each play is what makes Football so exciting.

American Football is a combination of chess and sport in which each team is trying to outsmart the other team, yet also needs to physically out-perform the opposing team.
It is the nature of the game of being very goal oriented, that the players need to get together in the huddle and learn about the specific plans for the next play. Each player has a very specific roll and MUST be at exactly determent location.

Some plays are designed to take advantage of speed while some plays are designed to take advantage of strength while others are designed to use certain tricks. This is the reason that each play is designed to use a different set of players. Each team has 11 players on the field at any given play. However, it is the specific play that determines which players will be on the field. It is very common to see substitution of 1-3 players before each play.

A play may normally last just about 5 seconds to complete and then there will be a period of about 40 seconds for the team to plan and prepare the next play.

It is the combination of all the stops and the fact that most plays are not designed to score points that give the first impression that Football is a lot of talk with little action. Therefore, it is common for many foreigners to give up watching Football after only few minutes.

However, it is this nature of the game that makes it so exciting – once you understand the specific goals. The breaks allow the fans to watch again each play with focus on much more details about what just happened, brainstorm (the chess mentality) the next move and anticipate it.

One more unique element of Football is that not all players play with the ball. There are few players that their mission is to advance the ball while few strong and heavy players (more about them later) protect the players who move the ball or push the defense in trying to make a hole for the ball runners.

As a result, there is plenty of action within those 5 seconds that are not related to the ball or even near it! Therefore, it is very hard to see all the action that is taking place on the field during those short seconds. The break after each play is needed in order to learn about many more details. Replay in Football is NOT only to watch the play a second time from another angle, but also to get the chance to see things that many have been missed the first time. This makes replay in Football even more important and exciting.

Once you will understand the very basic plays of Football and be able to get into this process of evaluating the previous game and brainstorm about the next move you will find Football to be probably the most exciting game.
Soccer is a game of a lot of movements with very little high-level anticipation. As a matter of fact, the greatest moments of anticipations in soccer are usually before penalty kicks or corner kicks.

Football, on the other hand, has high anticipation level at every play because every play has specific goal.

In this regard, we can say that every play is successful by either the offence or defense. This is because one of them achieved their specific goal for that play.

While soccer is continues game, Football is a game of bursts. The players give all they have for a period of few seconds and then quickly prepare for the following play.

Football is a very complicated game. I suggest learning in the beginning just the very basic rules. Additional advantage of watching the game is due to the fact that you keep learning new things all the time. You will keep learning new rules on a regular basis almost every game you watch for number of years.
Different Plays

There are different rules for different leagues. Generally, I will refer in this book to principles that are common to the NFL which is the most popular league in the world. In college and Canada there are some different rules and obviously Arena and Flag Footballs have completely different rules.

The field of play is 100 yards long (a yard is about 91 cm) and there are two End Zones – one at each side. Each End Zone is 10 yard long. The game is played for 4 quarters of 15 minutes each. Some of the breaks between the plays stop the clock while some plays do not. A full game will normally last about 3 hours.

A team has about 45 players, which only 11 of them play on any given play. With rare exceptions, most players will play only on offence or only on defense.

The ultimate goal in American football is to score a touchdown. This is when a team gets the ball into the other team's End Zone.

When a team scores a touchdown they receive 6 points. When a team finds it difficult to score a touchdown they can choose to score a field goal for only 3 points.

After scoring a touchdown the team gets an opportunity to score either an extra point (by kicking the ball between the 2 goal posts and above the bar) or score extra two points (by moving the ball again into the End Zone during the following play).

The game is broken down into many small sections. In each section, a team gets 4 tries to move the ball at least 10 yards or score.
If they succeed to move 10 yards or more, they get another set of 4 tries to move additional 10 yards. If they fail, than the other team gets possession of the ball.

Each team has 11 players on the field for each play. The team who has possession of the ball is the offense and the other team is the defense.

First we will understand the tasks of the offense and then it will be easier to understand the tasks of the defense.

Each play begins on a determent yard line. This imaginary line is called "LINE OF SCRIMMAGE". Each play begins with a snap of the ball.

There are basically 2 kinds of plays: **Passing** the ball or **Running** (Rushing) it.

In the offense unit the Quarterback is the most important player. He is the manager who informs the other players about the play they are about to execute, he is the one responsible to make sure that all the players are exactly at the right position and he is the one who shouts when to snap the ball. With very few exceptions, he is the one who first receives the ball after the snap.

The play begins with the snap. Most players are not allowed to move before the snap. Their move would be a penalty in which their team is panelized by moving back 5 yards.

**A Passing Play:**

2-4 fast, tall and athletic players (called wide receivers) will run (only after the snap) deep as possible behind the defense.

The Quarterback will hold the ball as long as possible until one of the receivers has achieved good penetration into the defense field and then will throw (pass) the ball towards him.

A receiver needs to catch the ball and run with it as deep as possible until he is brought down by a defender. This will be the end of the play and the next play will start from the line in which the receiver was brought down.

**The defense will try to do the following in a passing play:**

1) They have few big and strong guys who try to get to the Quarterback before he passes the ball and knock him down.
In order to prevent this, the offense also has few big and strong guys who need to protect the Quarterback! That coliseum between the 10-14 big players looks more like Sumo fight than regular wrestling.

Obviously, it is the ball players who get the most attention and glory. However, often the success of the team depends on the quality of their big linemen. Their weakness could destroy their own team success while their strength would give their ball players great opportunities.

There are many rules regarding the way those players are allowed to push and hold each other. Many of the penalties in the game involved illegal actions by one of them. However, it takes some experience to understand exactly what each of them is doing. It is common for many fans to notice the action among those big players ONLY during replay.

2) The defense has a few fast, tall, strong and athletic players who will run with the receivers (normally one defender per receiver) and try to prevent them from catching the ball.

They also need to bring the receiver down once he does catch the ball.

A passing play will last only few seconds and will probably end with one of the following options:

1) The big defensive guys knock the Quarterback down before he passed the ball.

This is a "SACK". In this case the offense will start the following play where the Quarterback was brought down, after usually losing few yards on the play.

2) The Quarterback passed the ball but nobody catches it.

This is an "INCOMPLETE PASS" in which the offensive team will start the next play in the exact same line of the previous play. However, they have wasted one try.

3) A receiver catches the ball. He runs with it as much as possible and if he makes it all the way to the end zone, he scores a touchdown.
However, he will usually be brought down by a defender before he scores. In that case the play ends at the spot where he was brought down.

The receiver can also choose to get out of bounds. Then he stops the play. The offense will start the next play at the line where he got out of bounds.

**Important**: The quarterback is allowed to pass the ball to a receiver that is already inside the End Zone. Whenever the receiver catches the ball while he is already inside the End Zone, than that would be a touchdown.

4) A turn over situation.

This is when the defense unit gets possession of the ball. This will usually be in one of the following situations:

A. The defenders can also catch the ball. In that case we have "INTERCEPTION".

After interception, the defender can run back and try to score a touchdown himself. He will run back until he himself is brought down.

B. A "FUMBLE" - When the receiver catches the ball but then drops it.

After a fumble, any player from both teams can pick up the ball. The ball then belongs to the team who got control over it.

Another Fumble situation is when a defender knocks the Quarterback down and forces him to drop the ball. Any player from either team can pick up the ball and run with it.

In the very few seconds after a turn over while the play is still going on, the teams actually change roles. The offense unit becomes defense and visa verse.

However, after the play is over, there will be a break in the game to allow ALL the players from both teams to leave the field and new set of players will get on the field.

In a team of 45 players, every player (with very few exceptions) plays only either in the offense or defense unit. The reason for this is because each player is specialized in a specific position.
Note - A very interesting difference between American Football and soccer is the role of getting the ball out of bounds.

In soccer and basketball when the ball goes out of bounds it is always given to the other team - players usually try to prevent the ball from getting out of bounds because than they will lose the ball.

However, in American football, getting the ball out of bounds is actually a legitimate way of stopping the play. Many times a player will get out of bounds on purpose. The team still keeps possession of the ball!

When a player gets out of bounds with the ball in his position, the next play starts on the same yard line where he went out of bounds.

I mentioned above that the wide receiver tries to penetrate as deep as possible behind the defense before he even receives the ball. This is probably what is desired. However, in reality, the Quarterback has a limit of time until he has to pass the ball.

The nature of the game is that within few seconds the defender's big guys would get to him and knock him down. He usually would need to make the pass within less than 5 seconds.

For that reason, many offensive plays are designed to get only 3-10 yards with higher success rates, than to get a lot of yards with one big play.

Obviously, each team has dozens of options to choose from. You will learn more of those options and tricks slowly game by game.

**A Running (Rushing) Play:**

As soon as the Quarterback gets the ball, he hands it to another player who is behind him. That player who is called a "running back" will try to run with the ball through the defense line.

The running back is also a fast runner but he is usually shorter, heavier and stronger than the receivers.
The defense players try to build a wall of strong players in order to stop the runner. At the same time, the offense’ strong players try to push the wall down and make a hole for the runner to run through.

Most running plays will end when the defense are able to bring the runner down. The next play will begin at the line where he was brought down.

In a running game there is also a turn over situation. This happens when the runner drops the ball. When he does, it is a fumble in which any player from either team can pick up the ball and run with it.

A runner can also get out of bounds with the ball in order to stop the play. The offense keeps the ball and will start the following play at the line where he went out of bounds.

There are many options of Passing and Running plays. Each team has dozens if not hundreds of plays and formations they can choose from.

This is the reason that the offense players need to get together in the HUDDLE before each play and learn from the Quarterback about which play they are going to execute.

The offensive unit has different players for different plays - Some plays are based on speed while other are based on strength. This is one of the reasons that a unit many times substitutes 1-3 players before a play.

One of the surprising facts is, that not every offence player is even allowed to catch the ball. In a fact, there is a penalty in case the Quarterback does pass the ball to one of those players. On the other hand, every defender is allowed to block or steal the ball.

There are many complicated rules regarding how and when each player is allowed to block another player, when and to whom a Quarterback is allowed to pass the ball and when a play is over.

Many of those rules will be confusing when you watch the game for the very first couple of times. Enjoy the game by understanding ONLY the very basic rules. Later on, you could buy one of the more advanced books available so you can understand the game much better.
Naturally you will pay attention mostly to the offensive players. Yet, the defenders also have the ability to catch the ball or pick a loss ball from the ground. Occasionally, a defender will take control over the ball and will run with it back and score a defense touchdown. The following clip includes number of great examples.
The field has lines every 5 yards but only every second line is numbered. Canadian League has a different field of 110 yards with different shape of the End Zone.

The game is played for 4 quarters of 15 minutes each. Some of the breaks between the plays stop the clock, and some do not. Therefore, the game itself is played for about 3 hours.

The offense gets 4 tries to move the ball 10 or more yards. If they fail, the other team gets the ball. When a team succeeds to move it at least 10 yards, they get another set of 4 tries to move the ball another 10 yards.

Tries do not accumulate - If a team moves the ball 10 yards within 2 tries, they still receive only 4 (and not 6) tries to move another 10 yards.

Yards also do not accumulate - If a team moves the ball 13 yards within 4 tries, they still need to move 10 (and not 7) more yards within 4 more tries.

Below are few examples that will illustrate better the different possibilities:

Team A is on offense and team B is on defense. The ball is on the A's 10 Yard line. Team A has 4 tries to move the ball to at least the 20-yard line. You will hear the term "1st and 10" which means that it is their first try and they need to move at least 10 yards.

On the first try they move the ball only 4 yards, which means they have remaining 3 tries to move 6 yards more. In this situation you will hear the term "2nd and 6" which means that now it is their second try and they need to move at least 6 yards.
Team A starts the second try from the 14-yard line. On the second try they move 5 yards more which brings them to the 19-yard line.

Now they have 2 more tries to get one more yard. The term used is "3rd and 1" which means that now it is their third try and they need to get one more yard.

They start the third try from the 19-yard line and move 4 more yards, which brings them to the 23-yard line. In this case they have succeeded to move the ball more than 10 yards within 4 tries and therefore they get another set of 4 tries to move 10 more yards. In this case you will hear again the term "1st and 10", which means that it is their first try to move 10 more yards.

They move 7 yards on the first try, which brings the ball to the 30-yard line. Now they are at "2nd and 3" which means they are going for the second try and need to move 3 more yards.

On the second try they actually lose 5 yards and go back to the 25-yard line. Now they are "3rd and 8", which means that it is their third try and they need to move the ball 8 more yards.

They get 3 yards on this try, which brings the ball to the 28-yard line. Now they are "4th and 5", which means they have fourth try and need to move the ball at least 5 more yards and get at least to their 33 yard line. This is where we get to a very interesting situation:

Team A can try and attempt to move the ball 5 more yards on their fourth try. However if they fail, team B gets the ball wherever team A fails.

If team A moves only 4 yards on the fourth try and get the ball only to the 32 yard line, team B will start 32 yards away from team A's end zone. This situation is considered to be too risky for team A.

What team A will usually do in this situation is to punt (kick away) the ball as far as possible into B's side of the field. This means that team A voluntarily is giving away the ball to team B without actually trying to move to the 33-yard line.

The possession of the ball after a punt goes automatically to team B. Yet, at least team A managed to send them back far into their own side of the field.
**Punt vs Kicking** Amazingly, there is very little kicking play in American Football game. There are 4 common kinds of kicks:

1) **Punt** - When a team failed to move the ball 10 yards within the first 3 tries, they will usually punt the ball on the fourth try as deep as possible into the other team's area.

The ball is snapped to the punter who drop kicks it while it is still in the air.

He tries to kick it as far as possible without getting the ball into the opponent's end zone (if the ball does get into their end zone, the other team automatically starts on their 20 yard line).

He also kicks it as high as possible in order to give his teammates as much time to run towards the ball and prevent the other team from returning the ball back.

2) **Field Goal** - If a team failed to move the ball 10 yards within their first 3 tries and they are close to the opponent's end zone, they can choose to kick a field goal.

A player - who is the holder - receives the ball after the snap and puts it on the ground and holds its tip with one finger while the other tip is on the ground. The kicker stands few yards behind the holder and then runs and kicks the ball. He needs to kick it between the two upright poles and above the crossbar.

If succeed, he scores 3 points. If he fails, the other team will have the ball at the very spot he failed. For that reason kicking from far away is risky - Not only your chances to score are smaller, but you will also give the opponents a good field position if you fail.

The kicker is a different player than the punter. It is really the confidence that the coach has for his kicker that will most often determent at what point he will choose to kick or punt.

Since the kicker and the punter are different players and the kicker needs a formation that will include a holder, the defense will know seconds in advance what the offence are about to do.

3) **Extra Point** - After a team scores a touchdown their kicker may kick the ball for extra point.
4) **Kick off** - This is the way a team starts the game in the beginning, at half time and after they score points. The kicker puts the ball at a fixed location (his own 30 yard line) and kicks the ball as far (without reaching the end zone) and high as possible.

As with a punt, if the ball gets into the end zone, the other team will start on their own 20 yard line. As with a punt, the kicker kicks the ball as high as possible in order to give his teammates as much time to run towards the ball and prevent the other team from returning the ball back.

You will learn in the next section about the issue that most foreigners have the most problem with - The so many breaks between the plays.
The Game's Breaks

From my experience, the issue that bothers foreigners the most is the fact that there are stops after each play. The game does not seem to them to flow as much as other games such as soccer, basketball or rugby.

However, when you understand the game with its “stop and go method”, the 40 so seconds break between each play, not only is not a liability but it does actually become an important assert of the game.

American Football has an element of the chess game. This is manifested in the control of the game.

The head coach has communication with people at the booths, with other coaches in his staff and even with the Quarterback who at times has earphones in his helmet whereby he can get instructions.

Photos are taken during the play and are developed immediately to share amongst the players in order to study their mistakes and the other team's weaknesses. This allows them to make changes in their formations, or even decide to choose different set of plays.

Put this all together and the 40 seconds between plays are very short and pressured. For the teams, it is a very busy time.

The team needs to decide what to play, give instructions to the Quarterback who then needs to pass the information to his teammates (in the huddle) and then each player still needs to get organized in his position in time before the snap.

**Note**: if the offence fails to snap the ball on time, or their players are still moving while trying to get organized in their position, than it is a penalty in which they lose 5 yards.

This is the part which in some ways it is more of chess game than a sport: trying to outsmart the other team by choosing the best play plan. Yet, there is also the physical issue and the need to outperform the other team.

The break is also important for the fans. It is just perfect time for fans to have a second look at the replay of the previous play and brainstorm about what should be the next play.
Remember that during the break you will not just see the replay of exactly what you were looking at the first time, but also important action that was outside the frame during the first watch. There is just too many things that happens on each play to catch it all on first time!

For those who understand the game, the time between plays becomes very entertaining! Football is a great game to watch together with friends and discuss each play during each break!

Another issue many foreigners look down upon American Football is the fact that American Football players do not play the whole game, but often go out to rest.

This may be considered a bit "wimpy" to those who are used to playing soccer or rugby in which the same players play throughout the game.

There are two main reasons for so many substitutes in American Football:

1) The plays of the game are so technical and specific, that most plays require specific players.

This is not just regarding choosing between a passing player or a running players but also regarding choosing which specific runner or receiver to select for a specific play. This is because the runners and the receivers themselves have different specialties that could take different advantages over a given defiance of unit.

The formation is also determent by the position of the ball on the field. Some plays are designed to get just 1-3 yards with a good success rate, while other plays are designed to get 10+ yards but with less success rate.

The first option is based more on strength, while the second option is based more on speed.

It is true that even in soccer each player has a different role. Yet, soccer is designed in a way that each player can play at any position (with the exception that only the goalie is allowed to use his hands). Soccer is a continuing game in which every player has to know how to play offense and defense at any position on the field.
American Football, on the other hand, is designed to have stops between each play in which players can be substituted according to the need of the play.

2) To rest - It is true that in soccer the same players play the whole game. Yet, they are not all the time involved in the play.

Actually, in soccer, each player is involved only with the game when he is near the ball, or in the area where the ball is going to be. He is usually not involved in the play if it is far away from him. This allows him to rest during the game. In addition, the game does not require him to sprint each time he is involved. Soccer player burst into full energy only occasionally during the game.

In American football each player has a very specific role. This requires of him absolute concentration and energy during the seconds of each and every play.

Soccer even allows for situation in which 10 players play against 11. This would be as a result of penalty or injury.

On the other hand, in American Football, each player MUST be in full concentration during each play. It takes one player to lose his concentration or footing for just friction of a second in order for the other team to take advantage of it. Each player on the field has a very important role in each play.

For the key players the game is not consistently, moderately run, but rather sets of many sprints at full burst of energy. As a result, they need to take breaks during the game and be replaced by another player who is more fresh.

Compare it to most athletics who need to take a break after 100 meter dash. Receivers – even if they do not eventually get the ball on that play – run fast in order to get rid of their defender.
Officiating The Game

Soccer's fans are used to see all the action just around the ball. Players who are not near the ball can even rest at times.

However, in American Football, **every player is involved in each play!**

This very much affects the officiating of the game. In soccer one referee is enough to manage the whole game with a help of 2 linesmen.

However, in American Football you need 7 officials on the field, each looking for something different. They all have different roles and responsibilities.

The official with the white hat is the referee who makes the final decision.

Few of the officials are not even looking towards the area of the ball. They are actually looking to make sure that the struggles between the big guys are according to the rules. Sometimes those officials stand with their back towards the players with the ball – completely focusing on the action that is going on among the big guys in the center.

The novice fan usually overlooks the action between the big players. However, it is very much exciting and as an important part of the game. This is also the area where many penalties do occur.

Because of the nature of American Football, many penalties do NOT stop the play. The official who calls it throws a yellow flag to acknowledge the foul, but lets the play continue. As a result, a play may have more than one penalty.

After the end of the play the referee learns from the officials about relevant fouls and then he announces the penalty to the teams.

The team that benefits from the penalty can decide to either accept the penalty or decline it and take the outcome of the play. At times, this decision is not automatic and can be a difficult one to make. The following example will show why:

Team A is on the 10 yard line and it is "1st and 10" (it’s their first try to move 10 yards).
During the play they move the ball 8 yards, which brings the ball to the 18-yard line. However, there was a penalty in their benefit, which will give them 5 yards and put the ball on the 15-yard line.

If they accept the penalty, the play does not count which means that they still have 4 more tries but need to move the ball ONLY 5 more yards. If they accept the penalty they will be "1st and 5" – it will still be their first try but need to move the ball 5 yards.

If they choose to decline the penalty and take the play they will have the ball at the 18-yard line with the need to move only 2 yards. However, they will have only 3 more tries remaining. If they decline the penalty they will be "2nd and 2" - they have 3 more tries to get 2 yards.

Basically, they can choose between having 4 tries to move 5 yards or 3 more tries to move only 2 yards. It is not always clear which decision is the best for the team. It is up to them to make up their minds.

They will tell their decision to the referee who will announce the penalty out loud so the fans can learn about the nature of the penalty and whatever the team declined it or chose to accept it.

The whole penalty issue in American Football has a unique philosophy, which brings another major difference particular to this game:

This is the only major sport I am aware of that actually allows a TV review.

There are different opinions about the issue. The NFL keeps changing their policies. A team can ask for a second review by TV in order to change the ruling on the field. The referee MUST make a decision FIRST and his ruling will be changed ONLY if it conclusive that he initially made a mistake.

This book is very basic and I do not want to get into the very technical rulings of each play. However, I am giving you some short background on the reasons for second review:

One very difficult aspect of officiating is the decision of what exactly happened to the ball exactly when the play ended. Did the player catch or dropped the ball friction of a second before the end of the play or after? Did the player move the ball more than 10 yards before or after the play ended?
There are dozens of factors that would cause a play to end. Many of them are not determent by the ball but rather when certain part of the player’s body such as his knee, foot or elbow touches the ground. The challenge is to see the position of the ball exactly at this very moment. Sometimes, you need to watch clips from two cameras: one to watch the knee (frame by frame) and determent exactly when the play ended, and then cross it with a second camera to follow the ball frame by frame.

Naturally, the momentum carries the ball even after the play ended. That extra few inches could be the dispute between both teams.

I find it amazing that the officials are rarely wrong. It is not often that their decision is been overruled by second review.

Remind you that disputes are not always critical: when a team needs to move the ball 10 yards it is not really important if they moved it 5 yards and 4 inches or 5 yards and 6 inches. They are not going to review this. However, it is important whatever the team was able to move the ball 9 yards and 11 inches or 10 yards and an inch. Often, a team that is not happy with the referee’s call will challenge it.

**One more important fact about penalties:** American football IS NOT (as one may think) a game of wrestling!! There are many limitations on what players can do to each other and how they are allowed to tackle. The policy is to enforce those limits and make sure that nobody gets hurt. Teams are penalized for their player's fouls!

Football could be a very dangerous game that could cause even fatalities. There are many rules that are designed to protect the players from serious injuries and the officials make sure to enforce those rules.
The Ball

For many foreigners the game's ball may appear similar to that of Rugby. However, not only are both balls not the same size, they actually have some distinctive characterizes:

The ball in American Football is smaller and more pointed. It is designed to be thrown very far in order to allow the Quarterback to pass the ball for a long distance and reach the receiver. As a result of its unique shape the ball of American Football is very difficult to catch – especially, after it hits the ground.

You will be surprised at first how many players fail to catch a loose ball. This fact is even worse when one needs to catch the ball after it hits the ground. The ball could be very illusive. Once the ball hits the ground, nobody knows what it is going to do. Sometime you may even feel as if the ball toys with the players.

Catching the ball is not an easy task and takes a lot of talent. It is a mistake to compare it to basketball, soccer or even rugby, which have balls that are easy to catch.

Most Football plays include only two exchanges of the ball: first is the snap towards the Quarterback and then he gives it either to the runner or receiver. However, the rules allow Football players to exchange the ball BACKWARDS as many times as they wish exactly like in rugby. Still, they rarely do this in Football because the more exchange the team will have the greater the chance the ball will fall on the ground. At that moment, it is a loose ball that the defense can take control over.

Handing the ball backwards in Football is considered unsafe and usually very foolish. There are two reasons:

1) The chances the player will actually catch the ball are not as high as in rugby.

2) Once the ball falls to the ground, it is just a guess who is going to get control over it.

Remember that in a forward pass, if nobody catches the ball and it hits the ground, the play ends as an incomplete pass. However, in a backward pass, when the ball falls to the ground, the play continues and every player on the field can gain control over the ball
This is one of the main differences between American Football and rugby. Not only in American Football a team can pass the ball forward, but they also rarely hands the ball backwards more than once per play.
**Protective Gear**

Many foreigners have problems with the fact that American Football players are wearing (what they consider to be) too much protective gear. This is especially true with people who are used to Rugby or Australian rules, which are also very physical games, but without wearing any protective gear. I have many friends from England, Australia and South Africa who are not impressed with Football regarding this issue.

Without taking anything away from Rugby or Australian rules, there is a good reason for the protection in American Football.

Football players are vulnerable to extreme and different kinds of rough plays compare to other games. It has to do in the way one is allowed to block and tackle another player and the way in which a player is vulnerable even if he is not handling the ball himself.

In rugby, the defender's object is to stop the player. For this reason, he would tackle in a way to **GRAB** the runner and hold him in place. In American Football, the object of the defender is actually to knock the runner down to the ground. He would, at times, tackle him not in a way to hold him in place, but in order to hit him down to the ground.

If in rugby, a defender will tackle the runner and grab him, in American football the defender in many situations will actually **COLLIDE** with the runner at full force and speed. Since the play is over as soon as the runner falls down to the ground, the defender is not even concerned about holding the runner, but rather putting his whole energy into knocking him down.

By the way, the colliding is not only the defiance players against the ball carrier. Often, there are other offence players who will lead the way for the ball carrier and will collide with defense players in order to open a way for the ball carrier.

Those collisions could be dangerous to the player who makes the hit as to the player who receives the hit.

Soccer, Rugby and Australian Rules are tough and physical games in which players can get injured. However, those injuries are almost never life threatening.

In American football, those "human collisions" are actually extremely dangerous and without protection, many of them could even be fatal. As a matter of fact, quite
a few of them were fatal and dozens of players got killed about 100 years ago before head protection was introduced.

Even now, there are few fatalities every year – especially in the younger leagues of high school and college. There were 28 fatalities directly related to the game between 2000 and 2005.

The protective gear includes obvious Helmet but also shoulder pads, hip pads and knee pads. There are additional pads that are optional.

Safety is a very important issue in American Football. This is not only shows in the protective gear that players wear, but also is an important issue for the officials that at times will even stop a play just in order to prevent injuries.

It is also important to note that there are so many rules in the game that prevent players from hurting each other. There are many rules regarding the different ways in which each player is allowed to tackle or stop other players. The attitude of the different leagues is to protect the safety of the players.
Basic Rules

American Football is a very sophisticated game with many technical rules. There is a lot of action all over the field. It is hard to see everything within the first time. Take advantage of the break after each play in order to view the play with a different angle.

In the next couple of pages, I will mention few of the basic rules that you will mostly encounter, during the first games that you watch. You might decide to leave reading the following two sections only after watching the first game. That is OK.

I suggest you to read the following pages before watching your second game. As you watch more games, you will get to know more rules.

There are more advanced books that would help you understand the game to its details. In addition, you might want to learn to play one of the video games. That might be the best way to learn all the different formations and possibilities.

Touch down

Touchdown is when a team is able to move the ball into the opponent's end zone while they have possession of the ball. It is important for the tip of the ball to reach the line, even if the player himself does not reach the line.

The ball itself does not even need to cross the line. It is just enough for its tip to reach the line while it is in possession.
The team does not need to move the ball across the line in possession of it. They can actually throw the ball to a receiver who is already in the end zone.

It is also important to note that **the ball itself does not need to touch the ground**.

One of the major differences between American Football and rugby is that in Football, once the ball reaches the line (while it is in possession), the play ends with a 6 points score for a touchdown.

In American Football the extra point kick takes place from about the same spot regardless of how close the touchdown was to the center of the field. This is different from Rugby in which the closer the touchdown to the center, it is easier for the kicker. Therefore, in Rugby, the game continues even after the player passes the line. This is because the player tries to get as close as possible to the center of the field in order to help the kicker.

In Rugby, the play ends only when the player puts the ball on the ground. This is different in American Football, where the play ends as soon as the ball reaches the line without the need to actually put the ball on the ground or the need to get closer to the center.

The touchdown credits the team with 6 points. They can kick the ball for an extra 1 point or they can try and score a second touchdown for extra 2 points for a total of 8 points for the drive.

**Note:** An important factor of determining the result of a play is knowing the exact position of the ball at the very exact moment when the play ended.

Sometimes the ball carrier falls short of the end zone but manage to stretch his hand with the ball to where it is touching the line. The play ends the moment his knees touches the ground. It is often debated wherever he stretched his hand across the line before his knee touched the ground (in this case it is considered a touchdown) or after his knee touched the ground (in this case the play ended before he scored).

Sometimes 7 officials on the field are not enough to make the correct decision and only a frame-by-frame TV review will revile the correct answer - Wow.
Out of bounds

In American Football, when the ball goes out of bounds, it is given to the team who last had possession of the ball (unless it is during the fourth try when a team fails to reach the 10 yards). This is very different from Soccer or Basketball.

Getting out of bounds on purpose is a very common strategy in order to stop the clock by the trailing team towards the end of the game when they need so desperately to score (more about this in the following pages).

Whenever the Quarterback passes the ball and it gets out of bounds without anybody catching it is an incomplete pass. If the ball gets out of bounds not in a possession of any play, it is given to the team that last had position of the ball.

What is a catch

One of the main issues that are debated during the game is whether a player actually caught the ball or not! By definition a catch is when a player gets CONTROL over the ball and has BOTH feet on the ground (does not need to be at the same time).

In so many situations, the receiver will jump to catch the ball and will land on one foot and then on the other. Immediately then, the ball is knocked out of his hands. The issue is whether the ball fell from his hands before the second foot touched the ground or after.

If the ball was knocked out before the second foot touched the ground, it means that he actually never caught the ball and therefore it is an incomplete pass.

However, if he did catch the ball and AFTER THAT dropped the ball down, than this is a catch and a fumble, which means that any player (from either team) can pick up the ball and run with it.

Another common situation is to decide if a receiver caught the ball before he went out of bounds or not. The rule is that after the receiver gets control of the ball, he needs to touch both feet on the ground IN BOUNDS. The problem could be to determine exactly when the player got control of the ball.

For example: when a receiver runs catches the ball than step on right leg in bounds and then on left leg in bound this would be a catch. However, if the review will show that he caught the ball only after he already lifted up his right leg and then
stepped in bounds with his left leg but next step OUTSIDE with his right leg this would be ruled incomplete.

Those examples show the importance of instant replay as at times it is difficult to see exactly what really happened.

**Throw vs. Fumble**

Another difficult issue that comes up often during the game is regarding if the Quarterback threw the ball or fumbled it.

When the Quarterback passes the ball forward and nobody catches it, once the ball touches the ground the play is ruled dead and it is an incomplete pass.

However, when the Quarterback is been sacked and the ball is knocked down from his hands, it is a fumble. Any player from either team can pick up the ball and run with it.

The thing the officials look for is whatever his hand moved forward or not just before the ball left his hands - this is **regardless** if the ball itself ended few yards in front or behind the Quarterback!

Let me describe a common scenario: The Quarterback throws the ball forward. However, at the very same moment he was knocked down to the ground and the ball actually ends up couple of yards behind him. It appears at first to be a fumble.

Indeed, the officials themselves may believe that it was a fumble and will allow the play to continue. As a result all the players (after a fumble any player may take control of the ball) will fight for the ball. It is even possible that a defender will take control of the ball and will run with it and score a touchdown.

However, after TV review it will be clear that the Quarterback actually did throw the ball forward and therefore the play will be called back as an incomplete pass.

In many situations it is very difficult to decide whether the Quarterback actually threw the ball forward, or it was knocked down from his hand – even after slow motion review on TV. In such cases, the ruling on the field will stay.

Remind you: Ruling on the field will stay **UNLESS** it is conclusive that the officials were wrong.
**One ball exchange per play**

One of the unique issues with American Football is that most plays have only one exchange of the ball (not including the snap).

The rule is that you can have only ONE FORWARD pass during any play.

However, as with Rugby, you can have as many BACKWARD passes as players wish. However, most plays will not have more than one backward pass even when the rules allow them to do so. There is an important reason for this:

When you pass forward and nobody catches the ball, the play is over once the ball hits the ground. However, in a backward pass, if the players do not catch the ball, the ball is still alive and anybody can pick it up. Therefore, a backward pass is considered to be risky, and players will avoid it (though they have the option).

The issue is not only that a rugby player has greater chances of catching the ball than a Football player (see earlier in ball section). The big difference is what happens after the ball falls on the ground. Let’s take as an example when one player gives the ball to another player who is one yard behind him:

In the case of a rugby player, the same player himself is likely to gain position of the ball. This is hardly the case in Football. Even worse, the following scramble of trying to gain position might easily move the ball 20 additional yards backwards. Therefore, the team did not just loose one yard but easily can lose many more yards.

If in Rugby, a player with the ball who has been stopped by the defense has a desire to give the ball to another player thus keeping the play going on, in American Football, the player will actually protect the ball so the officials will end the play.

A play is over when the runner is knocked down. However to protect the players from injury, the officials will stop the play in case there is no more advancement of the ball even if the runner is still standing up.
**Time Management**

The teams can manipulate the clock in order to stop it or not. Some play results will stop the clock, while others will not. Team will manipulate the plays in order to benefit their situation. This happens usually towards the end of the half and the end of the game.

At the end of the game it is almost always the leading team who wants the time between plays to continue counting so the game will finish earlier. At the same time, the trailing team wants to stop the clock between plays, so they can run more plays. This is almost always the case - unless during a total defeat, in which the trailing team also wants the game to end as soon as possible!

Towards half time, time management is a bit more complicated. It is usually the team with the momentum at that time that wants to stop the clock and maybe score once more before half time. Therefore, in some situations, the leading team would actually like to stop the clock with hopes that they may score even more before half time. The trailing team may want to let the time run in order to end the first half as soon as possible with hopes of resting during the break.

I will not discuss here what kind of plays stop the clock and which do not. Just be aware of the issue. As you keep watching the game, you will learn to recognize which team is trying to stop the clock, and how they are trying to do so.

Also be aware that teams have time outs - 3 per half. They often use timeout in order to stop the clock the very same way many of us know from basketball.
**Video Clips**

In this section you will be able to watch a short selection of video clips of passes, runs, hits and bloopers.

The following clip is of few great passes. The passes in the clip are for long yards (20 yards and more) and most of them have scored touchdown. However, keep in mind that most passes are for short plays (5-20 yards) and many end as incomplete passes.

![Video Clip of Great Passes](image1)

The following clip is of some great running plays. Notice how some of the offence players path the way for the runner.

![Video Clip of Great Running Plays](image2)

The clips below are examples of how hard and dangerous those collisions could be. Notice that some of those collisions are not against the ball carrier but between a defender and an offence player that clears the path for the ball carrier.
Going To a Game

Many may have the impression that American Football is just a tough game where everybody's purpose is just to beat others. Some may think that it is just a senseless game of violence. However, one cannot be more far away from the truth.

One of the things that I was so impressed about while watching my first few games was how intelligence the game is. At the same time, the players are doing their best to avoid injure to each other.

Football is actually a family sport. Many of us who come from different countries are used to the fact that many sport events are designed for young males. In many countries it is not even considered safe for the whole family to go to a game.

This is totally different regarding the culture of American Football. It is a family sport. When you go to a game you will find couples, parents, kids and even grandparents who enjoy going to the game.

I highly recommend going to a collage or NFL game at least once when you visit the USA.

The National Football League (NFL) begins in (they play exhibition games during August) September till December. During January there are the Play-Off games that end with the biggest game of all - The Super Bowl. Most NFL games are played on Sunday.
College Football has many more teams around the USA, more games and therefore it is easier (and usually cheaper) to go to a game. Most College Football games are played on Saturday.

Many of us think of a College game, as one with low attendance in which only school members and few family members go and watch. However, in America, College football has a very high prestige with national TV broadcasting and many sold out stadiums.

I find Collage Football games to be very fun to attend - especially if it is your first game. Go to the game early and enjoy the atmosphere of the pre-game. Let the people near you know that you are watching the game for the first time. They will mostly help you understand the plays. You will most likely find it a very friendly event.
Flag Football

Football is a great spectator game. In this page I will provide some links for those of you who are interested in actually playing Football.

Playing Football is not as flexible as playing soccer. After all, you could play soccer with your friends at any condition with any number of players at any kind of field. People can play soccer with different number of players on each team in fields, which are not even rectangle. As kids, we used to play soccer in a field that had few trees in the middle.

On the other hand, Football is always a team game, which requires organization, equipment and safety arrangements. Starting a full contact Football team is something very involved that does requires investment of funds, experts and commitment.

There are number of levels of the game in which you could get involved with. Full contact game is the one that needs the most equipment and requires the most safety arrangement. It is my favorite sport and I wish you success in finding a team in your area. You might be surprised that there are few clubs even in your own country. I suggest looking online for such clubs.

However, if you do not have a full contact league in your area and want to get involved in the game with few of your friends, starting a Flag Football team would probably be the best way to go.

Flag Football is a much safer game and does not require expensive equipment. It is a game that is much easier to play and has fewer players on each team (you could play 5 vs. 5) and the same players play both on offense and defense.

The idea behind the game is that the defense does not physically stops the offense players but instead pulls a flag from the offensive player's belt.

Check the following site of Flag Football Magazine for a league in your area.

http://www.flagmag.com

Even if you do not find a league in your area, you would be able to find through "Flag Football Magazine" information about the rules of the game and learn from others how to start your own league. They provide a message board for players and fans around the world to communicate with each other.
Enjoy

We have talked about few of the unique principles of American football. By now you have good enough understanding in order to enjoy your first games.

As you watch the games try and learn more rules. I got into habit of learning at least 3 new things every game I watched during my first session as a fan.

During the first few games concentrate on the main players. As you enjoy and watch the game more, you will learn to enjoy the battles of the big guys. Though, their part is not as glamorous as the stars of the team, they are as vital to the team as any other player. As a fact of the matter, many experts say that the most important part of the game does happen around the line of scrimmage. You will notice that this is also where many of the penalties occur.

As you understand the game more, you will learn more about the rules of the big players, what kind of pushing they are allowed or not allowed to do etc.

I believe that the sign of one's enjoying the game is when one enjoys the breaks between each play. This is when you get to review the previous play and debate what should be played next.

I suggest those of you who are interested to learn more about the game to read books that were written by experts of the game and play video games (for PC, Apple, Wii, Play Station and X box)

Playing a video game is not only fun but also it is the best way to learn the strategies of the game. You make the decision whatever to pass, run, how deep, etc.

I hope that you will enjoy the game and become a fan of it.

Best Regards,
Eytan Katz
My name is Eytan. I was born in Israel in 1963. As a kid I played mostly Soccer and Basketball and a bit of Volleyball. I also visited England, Australia and South Africa and was introduced to Rugby and to Australia Rules Football.

The first American Football game that I ever watched was probably the Super Bowl between the 49er against the Miami Dolphins in January 1985 (although, I did not realize who they were at the time). I say watched but in reality I was dozing in and out of sleep and every time I woke up I was wondering when they will stop standing around talking and start playing.

My first impression, like so many other foreigners, was that it was a boring game. There were just too many breaks and so little game.

They did explain the rules in Hebrew during that specific broadcast. However, they failed to excite myself, my family or any of my friends.

In this regard I must say that the National Football League (NFL) boost about the amount of people around the world who watch the Super Bowl (I believe about a billion around the world). However, I am not sure if they are aware of how easier it is, with the wrong approach, to convert people against the game than into loving the game. I doubt if they even have a ratio statistic. In any case, I believe that that attempt in Israel in 1985 was not a successful one.
That was my ONLY attempt in watching Football for years. Even during my first ever visit to the USA in 1987 I made no attempt in watching the game or even learning about it.

It was only around 1988, when I watched the video clip of “Walk Of Life” by the Dire Straits that I saw for the first time Football as something exciting – probably because they took all the standing around and talking out of the clip.

In any case, it was obvious even from this very short clip that Football is different from Rugby. The thing that caught my eyes the most was the touchdown scored by Roger Craig towards the end of the clip. That was nothing like anything I saw in Rugby.

Therefore, during my second visit to the USA in 1989 I decided to give Football a second chance. That time I moved to San Francisco Bay Area. You can imagine the people’ reaction when I asked whatever there is a good Football team in the area. The San Francisco 49ers was the biggest team in the USA at the time.

I watched a game with some friends. It was only then, that I realized that the game I watched few years earlier was of the 49ers with Joe Montana as their Quarterback and not a team from the state of Montana.

My biggest change of attitude towards the game was when I realized that the game has very sophisticated strategies and it was never supposed to be a continuous game. Once I overcame that hurdle, the game made a lot of sense to me and I fell in love with the game. I became a big fan of the game – and especially of the 49ers - during the 1989 season.

I also had the experience of living for almost a year in International Hostel where I befriended many Europeans, Australians and South Americans – mostly fans of Soccer. I had the chance to explain the game to hundreds of them and even took few dozens of friends to watch their first games (49ers tickets were hard and expansive to get. Therefore, I took them to watch one of the two major college teams in the area).

My experience taught me that just teaching someone the rules is counterproductive because they would mostly be bored by the game. It is only by triggering their curiosity by explaining the unique principles of the game that turns them into
watching the game. I usually would not even explain the rules to them until we sit and watch the game.

It was during a visit back to Israel in the mid 90’s that I wrote this short book about the very basic principles of Football from a point of view of Soccer and Rugby fans. It was more of a hobby than of professional desires. Even though I never had the marketing backup to make the book successful, I received very warm reviews from the few hundred foreigners (from all over the world) who did read it. I still believe that for its niche, this is the best book out there.

This book was not written by a game expert. Its unique feature, that I am proud of, is that it was written by one who understands the foreigners’ basic attitude towards the game and cares to change it. I am proud to say that I added many more fans to the game.