The players on the offensive side of the ball include the

* **Quarterback:** The leader of the team. He calls the plays in the huddle, yells the signals at the line of scrimmage, and receives the ball from the center. Then he hands off the ball to a running back, throws it to a receiver, or runs with it.
* **Center:** The player who snaps the ball to the quarterback. He handles the ball on every play.
* **Running back:** A player who runs with the football. Running backs are also referred to as tailbacks, halfbacks, and rushers.
* **Fullback:** A player who's responsible for blocking for the running back and also for pass-blocking to protect the quarterback. Fullbacks, who are generally bigger than running backs, are short-yardage runners.
* **Wide receiver:** A player who uses his speed and quickness to elude defenders and catch the football. Teams use as many as two to four wide receivers on every play.
* **Tight end:** A player who serves as a receiver and also as a blocker. This player lines up beside the offensive tackle to the right or the left of the quarterback.
* **Left guard and right guard:**The inner two members of the offensive line, whose jobs are to block for and protect the quarterback and ball carriers.
* **Left tackle and right tackle:** The outer two members of the offensive line.

The players on the defensive side of the ball include the

* **Defensive tackle:** The inner two members of the defensive line, whose jobs are to maintain their positions in order to stop a running play or run through a gap in the offensive line to pressure the quarterback or disrupt the backfield formation.
* **Defensive end:** The outer two members of the defensive line. Generally, their jobs are to overcome offensive blocking and meet in the backfield, where they combine to tackle the quarterback or ball carrier. On running plays to the outside, they're responsible for forcing the ball carrier either out of bounds or toward (into) the pursuit of their defensive teammates.
* **Linebacker:** These players line up behind the defensive linemen and generally are regarded as the team's best tacklers. Depending on the formation, most teams employ either three or four linebackers on every play. Linebackers often have the dual role of defending the run and the pass.
* **Safety:** The players who line up the deepest in the secondary — the last line of defense. There are free safeties and strong safeties, and they must defend the deep pass and the run.
* **Cornerback:** The players who line up on the wide parts of the field, generally opposite the offensive receivers.

**How Football Teams Can Score Points in Game Play**

When a team has possession of the football, it can score points in several ways. Touchdowns, extra points, two-point conversions, field goals, and safeties all can increase a team's score.

**Touchdowns**

A touchdown is worth six points — the ultimate goal. A team scores a touchdown when an offensive player carrying the ball, or a defensive player who has obtained the ball from the other team after recovering a fumble or intercepting a pass, advances from anywhere on the field and breaks the plane of his opponents' goal line with the ball. The ball just has to cross the line.

A team is also awarded a touchdown when any player who's inbounds catches or recovers a loose ball behind his opponents' goal line. This sort of touchdown can occur on a kickoff, a punt, or a fumble.

**Extra points and two-point conversions**

A try for an *extra point*is attempted during the scrimmage down that's awarded after a touchdown. The extra point is successful when the kicker kicks the ball between the uprights of the goalpost and above the crossbar, provided that the ball was snapped 2 yards away from the opponents' goal line (or 3 yards away in high school or college). Teams should almost always make their extra point attempts — especially above the high school level — because the kick is a fairly easy one.

When a team is feeling particularly confident — or desperate — it might instead attempt a *two-point conversion* after scoring a touchdown. The offense gets the ball on the 2-yard line (the 3-yard line in high school and college) and must advance the ball across the goal line as if scoring a touchdown.

**Field goals**

A *field goal,* often the consolation prize for an offense that stalls within its opponent's 30-yard line, is worth three points. A team scores a field goal when a kicker boots the ball entirely through the uprights of the goalpost without touching either the ground or any of his teammates.

**Safeties**

A *safety* is worth two points. The important factor in a safety is *impetus,* which is the action of an offensive player that gives the ball momentum. A safety is awarded to the defending team if it sends the ball into its opponent's end zone and the ball becomes dead without changing possession. This occurs when a quarterback, running back, or receiver is tackled with the ball in his own end zone or goes out of bounds behind the goal line. A safety also is awarded when the offensive team commits a penalty that would otherwise require it to have the ball marked in its own end zone.

A safety is also awarded when a blocked punt goes out of the kicking team's end zone. And if the punt receiver muffs the ball and then, when trying to retrieve the ball, forces or illegally kicks it into the end zone (creating new impetus) and it goes out of the end zone, the defensive team is given a safety. If a muffed ball is kicked or forced into the end zone and then recovered there by a member of the receiving team, the defensive team is awarded a safety.

**Common Penalties in American Football**

By [**Howie Long**](http://www.dummies.com/search.html?query=Howie+Long) and [**John Czarnecki**](http://www.dummies.com/search.html?query=John+Czarnecki)

**Part of the**[**Football For Dummies (USA Edition) Cheat Sheet**](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/football-for-dummies-usa-edition-cheat-sheet.html)

Making sense of the penalties in American football can be tough — unless you have a handy list of common penalties to refer to as you watch a football game. Here are some brief explanations of common penalties in American football:

* **Encroachment:** When a defensive player crosses the line of scrimmage and makes contact with an opponent before the ball is snapped. Encroachment is a 5-yard penalty.
* **False start:** When an interior lineman on the offensive team moves prior to the snap of the ball, or when any offensive player makes a quick, abrupt movement prior to the snap of the ball. This is a 5-yard penalty.
* **Holding (defensive):** When a defensive player tackles or holds an offensive player other than the ball carrier. The penalty is 5 yards and an automatic first down.
* **Holding (offensive):** When an offensive player uses his hands, arms, or other parts of his body to prevent a defensive player from tackling the ball carrier. The penalty is 10 yards.
* **Offside:** When any part of a player’s body is beyond the line of scrimmage or free kick line when the ball is put into play. Offside is a 5-yard penalty.
* **Pass interference:** A judgment call made by an official who sees a defensive player make contact with the intended receiver before the ball arrives, thus restricting his opportunity to catch the forward pass. In the NFL, this penalty awards the offensive team the ball at the spot of the foul with an automatic first down. In college, pass interference is a 15-yard penalty and an automatic first down.
* **Personal foul:** An illegal, flagrant foul considered risky to the health of another player. A personal foul is a 15-yard penalty.
* **Roughing the kicker:** When a defensive player makes any contact with the punter, provided the defensive player hasn’t touched the kicked ball before contact. This is a 15-yard penalty and an automatic first down.
* **Roughing the passer:** When a defensive player makes direct contact with the quarterback after the quarterback has released the ball. This is a 15-yard penalty and an automatic first down.

**American Football Terms and Definitions**

By [**Howie Long**](http://www.dummies.com/search.html?query=Howie+Long) and [**John Czarnecki**](http://www.dummies.com/search.html?query=John+Czarnecki)

**Part of the**[**Football For Dummies (USA Edition) Cheat Sheet**](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/football-for-dummies-usa-edition-cheat-sheet.html)

To understand and enjoy American football, get familiar with key terms and what they mean. Until you grasp basic football lingo, listening to announcers call a football game can be like listening to monkey gibberish. The following list fills you in on the basic American football terms you need to know:

* **Backfield:** The group of offensive players — the running backs and quarterback — who line up behind the line of scrimmage.
* **Down:** A period of action that starts when the ball is put into play and ends when the ball is ruled dead (meaning the play is completed). The offense gets four downs to advance the ball 10 yards. If it fails to do so, it must surrender the ball to the opponent, usually by punting on the fourth down.
* **Drive:** The series of plays when the offense has the football, until it punts or scores and the other team gets possession of the ball.
* **End zone:** A 10-yard-long area at each end of the field. You score a touchdown when you enter the end zone in control of the football. If you're tackled in your own end zone while in possession of the football, the other team gets a safety.
* **Extra point:** A kick, worth one point, that's typically attempted after every touchdown (it's also known as the *point after touchdown,* or PAT). The ball is placed on either the 2-yard line (in the NFL) or the 3-yard line (in college and high school) and is generally kicked from inside the 10-yard line after being snapped to the holder. It must sail between the uprights and above the crossbar of the goalpost to be considered good.
* **Fair catch:** When the player returning a punt waves his extended arm from side to side over his head. After signaling for a fair catch, a player can't run with the ball, and those attempting to tackle him can't touch him.
* **Field goal:** A kick, worth three points, that can be attempted from anywhere on the field but is usually attempted within 40 yards of the goalpost. Like an extra point, a kick must sail above the crossbar and between the uprights of the goalpost to be ruled good.
* **Fumble:** The act of losing possession of the ball while running with it or being tackled. Members of the offense and defense can recover a fumble. If the defense recovers the fumble, the fumble is called a turnover.
* **Handoff:** The act of giving the ball to another player. Handoffs usually occur between the quarterback and a running back.
* **Hash marks:** The lines on the center of the field that signify 1 yard on the field. Before every play, the ball is spotted between the hash marks or on the hash marks, depending on where the ball carrier was tackled on the preceding play.
* **Huddle:** When the 11 players on the field come together to discuss strategy between plays. On offense, the quarterback relays the plays in the huddle.
* **Incompletion:** A forward pass that falls to the ground because no receiver could catch it, or a pass that a receiver dropped or caught out of bounds.
* **Interception:** A pass that's caught by a defensive player, ending the offense's possession of the ball.
* **Kickoff:**A free kick (meaning the receiving team can't make an attempt to block it) that puts the ball into play. A kickoff is used at the start of the first and third quarters and after every touchdown and successful field goal.
* **Line of scrimmage:** An imaginary line that extends from where the football is placed at the end of a play to both sides of the field. Neither the offense nor the defense can cross the line until the football is put in play again.
* **Offensive line:** The human wall of five men who block for and protect the quarterback and ball carriers. Every line has a center (who snaps the ball), two guards, and two tackles.
* **Punt:** A kick made when a player drops the ball and kicks it while it falls toward his foot. A punt is usually made on a fourth down when the offense must surrender possession of the ball to the defense because it couldn't advance 10 yards.
* **Red zone:** The unofficial area from the 20-yard line to the opponent's goal line. Holding an opponent to a field goal in this area is considered a moral victory for the defense.
* **Return:**The act of receiving a kick or punt and running toward the opponent's goal line with the intent of scoring or gaining significant yardage.
* **Rushing:** To advance the ball by running, not passing. A running back is sometimes called a *rusher.*
* **Sack:** When a defensive player tackles the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage for a loss of yardage.
* **Safety:** A score, worth two points, that the defense earns by tackling an offensive player in possession of the ball in his own end zone.
* **Secondary:** The four defensive players who defend against the pass and line up behind the linebackers and wide on the corners of the field opposite the receivers.
* **Snap:** The action in which the ball is *hiked* (tossed between the legs) by the center to the quarterback, to the holder on a kick attempt, or to the punter. When the snap occurs, the ball is officially in play and action begins.
* **Special teams:** The 22 players who are on the field during kicks and punts. These units have special players who return punts and kicks, as well as players who are experts at covering kicks and punts.
* **Touchdown:** A score, worth six points, that occurs when a player in possession of the ball crosses the plane of the opponent's goal line, when a player catches the ball while in the opponent's end zone, or when a defensive player recovers a loose ball in the opponent's end zone.

**The American Football Player's Uniform**

It isn’t the uniform that separates one football player from the others; it’s his talent and heart. But the uniform and its protective pads are a necessary part of playing football, something any player would be foolhardy to take the field without.

Why the need for all this protection? Well, the NFL is made up of players ranging in weight from 150 to 360 pounds and in height from 5'5" to 6'9". Some of these assorted sizes are able to bench press 550 pounds and run the 40-yard dash in as fast as 4.2 seconds. Because of the varied weights, sizes, strengths, and speeds of NFL players, the best protection possible is necessary. Smaller players want to be able to play without worrying about being crushed by all those large bodies.



**The jersey**

The jersey is the uniform’s shirt. The jersey is basically each player’s identity and marks his allegiance to a specific team. The jersey must be large enough to cover the shoulder pads.

Every NFL team jersey comes with a different numeral to distinguish one player from another. The numerals, which appear on the front and back of the jersey, are 8 inches high and 4 inches wide. Most high school and college teams have the same specifications, and some also place the number on the jersey’s sleeve.

In the NFL, specific positions wear certain numerals. For example:

* Quarterbacks and kickers wear from 1 to 19.
* Running backs and defensive backs wear from 20 to 49.
* Linebackers wear from 50 to 59 or 90 to 99.
* Offensive linemen wear from 50 to 79.
* Defensive linemen wear from 60 to 79 or 90 to 99.
* Receivers wear from 10 to 19 or 80 to 89.

On the back of each NFL jersey is the player’s surname in letters that are 2 1/2 inches high. His name appears across the upper-back just above the numerals.

**Helmets and face masks**

The helmet and face mask are designed to protect a player’s face and head from serious injury. Many players also wear a mouth guard to protect their teeth and prevent themselves from biting their tongues. A few players even wear another protective cap on the outside of the helmet for added protection.

Helmets can come equipped with these features:

* **Chin straps:**To keep the helmets snugly in place.
* **Air-filled interior pockets:** To prevent serious concussions, many helmets have air-filled pockets inside them. A player tests his helmet by sticking his head inside it and then shaking it for comfort, also making sure that it’s snug. If it’s too tight, he simply releases air from the air pockets.
* **Face masks:** The rounded metal material that comprises all face masks can’t be more than 5/8 inch in diameter. Most linemen wear a face mask called a*cage,* which has a bar extending down from the middle and top of the helmet to below the nose area. There, this bar joins two or three bars that extend from both sides that completely prevent an opponent’s hands from reaching inside the face area and under the chin. However, few quarterbacks and receivers have a face mask with a bar coming between their eyes, because they want to ensure they can see clearly; many also leave the chin exposed.
* **Sunshade:**Some helmets have a sunshade across the eyes to prevent sun glare from interfering with the player’s vision. This sunshade also keeps opponents from seeing the player’s eyes, which may give the player an advantage because opponents can’t see where the player is looking.

**Pads**

Pads are necessary to absorb the many physical blows a player takes during a game and protect every part of his body.

Next to the helmet, the shoulder pads are probably the number-one protective gear players wear. These pads protect a player’s shoulders, plus his sternum region, from injury. Some of these pads also cover the top of the arm and the rotator cuff. Other pads include thigh pads, elbow pads, hip pads, tail pads, and knee pads, although not all players wear them. Some quarterbacks even wear flak jackets to protect their rib cages, which are vulnerable when they lift their arms to throw the ball.

**Shoes and cleats**

Football cleats come in 1/2-inch, 5/8-inch, 3/4-inch, and 1-inch lengths. Wearing the right cleat is definitely important for traction. If a player doesn’t have the proper traction indoors or outside on a muddy surface, he simply can’t do his job and perform at the highest level. What type of cleat you use depends on a number of factors:

* **Conditions on the field:**The shorter cleat, which makes a player less prone to injury, is worn on dry, firm fields because it provides the ideal traction for these fast fields. On a slippery grass field, a player — especially a big lineman across the line of scrimmage — needs to dig deep to gain traction. In that situation, the player switches to a 3/4- or 1-inch cleat, depending on how he’s maneuvering (stopping and going) during warm-ups.
* **Position:**Receivers and running backs often wear shoes with fewer cleats than the larger, more physical players do.
* **Field material:**For artificial surfaces, most players wear a shoe that has a sole of dozens of rubber-nubbed, 1/2-inch cleats. Some linemen prefer a basketball-type shoe, especially on indoor turf where there’s no chance of rain and the surface isn’t as slick.

Because artificial surfaces tend to be sticky, players want to be able to glide over the surface. They don’t want to stop on a dime and change directions. Many players believe that instant stop and restart can be hazardous to their knees and ankles.

**American Football Stadiums and Fields**

Although the dimensions of a football field are the same, from high school to the NFL, every stadium seems different. That’s because all across America, the atmosphere inside each stadium, or the architectural character of the stadium itself, tends to be unique to that region. But every field shares some common characteristics.

**Football stadiums**

As you probably know, a *stadium* is the whole structure or area in which football and other games are played: the field, the stands, and so on. Stadiums come in all shapes and sizes. The important thing is that they allow room for the 100-yard-long football field.

NFL and college stadiums come in two main varieties: domed stadiums and outdoor stadiums. Domed stadiums are designed so that the players and the fans don’t have to deal with the weather; they always have a roof over their heads, and the teams always play on artificial turf. When you’re talking about big-time football, both types of stadiums generally seat between 50,000 and 107,000 screaming fans.

**The football field**

There’s nothing like a football field. Here's what you see on a football field, whether you’re on the field or in the stands:

* **Field dimensions:**The dimensions of a football field haven’t changed much through the years. The field has been 100 yards long and 53 1/3 yards wide since 1881. In 1912, the two end zones were established at 10 yards deep and have remained so ever since. Consequently, all football games are played on a rectangular field that’s 360 feet long x 160 feet wide.
* **The marks on the field:**All over the field, you see a bunch of white lines. Every line has a special meaning:



* + **End lines:** The lines at each end of the field.
	+ **Sidelines:**The lines along each side of the field.
	+ **Goal lines:**The goal lines are 10 yards inside and parallel to each end line.
	+ **Field of play:**The area bounded by the goal lines and sidelines.
	+ **50-yard line:** The field is divided in half by the 50-yard line, which is located in the middle of the field.
	+ **End zones:**The two areas bounded by the goal lines, end lines, and sidelines.
* **Yard lines:**Run parallel to the goal lines at intervals of 5 yards and are marked across the field from sideline to sideline. These lines stop 8 inches short of the 6-foot solid border in the NFL.

Yard lines give players and fans an idea of how far a team must advance the ball in order to record a first down. Consequently, the field is numbered every 10 yards, starting from the goal lines. All these lines and numbers are white.

* **Hash marks:** Mark each yard line 70 feet, 9 inches from the sidelines in the NFL. On high school and college football fields, the hash marks are only 60 feet from the sidelines. Two sets of hash marks (each hash is 1 yard in length) run parallel to each other down the length of the field and are approximately 18 1/2 feet apart.
* **Player benches:** Six feet outside the border of the field, or 6 feet from the sidelines, is an additional broken white line that defines an area in which only coaches and substitute players may stand. Six feet farther behind this broken white line is where the bench area begins. The team congregates in the bench area during a game, watching teammates play or resting on the benches. Within this area, team doctors and trainers also examine injured players.
* **The playing surface:**Two types of surfaces are used in football — natural grass and artificial turf. Each has its pros and cons:
	+ **Natural grass:** Generally, natural grass is similar to your backyard lawn or any baseball outfield: It’s green, soft, and beautiful, but it needs to be mowed, watered, and replaced.
	+ **Artificial turf:**Some artificial surfaces are made from synthetic nylon fibers that resemble very short blades of grass; other artificial surfaces have tightly woven fibers that give the feel of a cushioned carpet. Artificial surfaces are cheaper to maintain than natural grass.

Then again, in many stadiums, the artificial surface is also harder than natural grass because it’s often laid over cement, blacktop, or dirt. And on extremely hot days, artificial surfaces retain the heat, making a day that’s 95 degrees Fahrenheit feel like a 100-degree day.

* **Goalposts:**The goalpost serves as the guideline for the kicker, whose goal is to sail the ball high between the goalpost’s two vertical bars, an act that’s sometimes called *splitting the uprights.* The goalpost rises from the back of the end zone.

**Understanding American Football's Downs, Yardage, and Stuff**

The down system in American football keeps the game interesting. After all, if the offense kept running plays but never got anywhere, the sport would be really boring. Using the down system, the offense has four downs (essentially four plays) to go 10 yards. If the offensive team advances the ball at least 10 yards in four tries or fewer, the team receives another set of four downs.

If the offense has failed to advance 10 yards after three tries, the team usually*punts* the ball on the fourth down (a punt is a kick to the opponent without the use of a tee). The other team then begins with its own set of four downs, traveling in the opposite direction.

You may hear TV commentators use the phrase "three and out." What they mean is that a team has failed to advance the ball 10 yards on its first set of downs and has to punt the ball. You don't want your team to go three and out very often. But you do want to earn lots of *first downs,*which you get after your team advances the ball 10 yards or more in the allotted four downs. Getting lots of first downs usually translates to more scoring opportunities, which are definitely good things.

Football has its own lingo to explain the offense's progress toward a first down. A first down situation is also known as a "first and 10" because the offense has 10 yards to go to gain a first down. If your offense ran a play on first down and you advanced the ball 3 yards, your status would be "second and 7"; you're ready to play the second down, and you now have 7 yards to go to gain a first down.

As a viewer, you aren't expected to just remember what down it is and how many yards to go for a first down. Football makes it easy by providing people and signs to help you keep track:

* Two *rodmen* hold metal rods, with Xes at the top, connected by a chain that stretches exactly 10 yards. One rod marks where the possession begins, and the other extends to where the offensive team must go in order to make another first down.
* The third person, the *boxman,* holds a marker that signifies where the ball is and what down it is. Atop this rod is the number 1, 2, 3, or 4, designating which down it is.
* In all NFL stadiums, a person also marks where the *drive* began (that is, where the offensive team assumed possession of the ball). Many high school and college fields don't have these markers.

Whenever there's a critical measurement for a first down, the chain crew is brought to the hash marks nearest where the ball is positioned, and the officials use the rods to measure whether the offense has obtained a first down.

Thanks to the miracle of technology, determining where a team has to advance the ball to get a first down is easier than ever if you're watching television. On the TV screen during a game, you'll see an electronic line down the middle of the field that marks where a team must go to get a first down.

**See also:**

[**How Football Teams Can Score Points in Game Play**](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/how-football-teams-can-score-points-in-game-play.html?cid=embedlink)

[**Common Football Terms to Know**](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/common-football-terms-to-know.html?cid=embedlink)

[**Football Players’ Roles in Team Offense and Defense**](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/football-players-roles-in-team-offense-and-defense.html?cid=embedlink)

[**What Football Playing Field White Lines Mean**](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/what-football-playing-field-white-lines-mean.html?cid=embedlink)