

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the following people, for sharing their knowledge and season tickets with me: my husband, Ray Hengerer; my late father, Richard Gordon; my uncle, Donald Gordon; my former roommate, Debbie Murphy; and all of the other football fans who have shared their love and knowledge of the game.

Any mistakes in this guide are mine.

Football Basics – How the American Football Game is Played

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INTRODUCTION

Football should be an easy game to understand. Run the ball, throw the ball, kick the ball, score. One hour and 12 minutes later the team with the most points wins.

Not quite.

Add players performing amazing feats of athleticism, players making errors, factor in rules and regulations, injuries, timeouts, commercials, and NOW you have a football game.

A college football game first caught my interest. The ball was received by a player near the goal line, and he ran all the way up the field and made a touchdown. *Wow*, I thought, *this game is great!* This doesn't happen often, as players and fans know, but we all enjoy the exciting plays.

I grew up in New Jersey, following the Giants. The years my father and uncle had season tickets and neither wanted to use them, my sisters and I would go. Being at any game is a thrill, and I've attended games in all sorts of weather: Giants Stadium in quintessential fall weather (Jets and Giants games); the wind and snow of a New Jersey winter (Giants games); the warm sun at Joe Robbie Stadium (Dolphins games); and the shelter of the Trans World Dome (St. Louis Rams game).

Having a team to follow (or player, or coach) makes it more interesting when you are watching a game. My first roommate was--still is--an Eagles fan. When we'd watch, she'd root for the Eagles, I would root for the Giants, and if neither team was playing, we'd root for the team with the cutest quarterback.

I will always be a Giants fan, but I've picked up some other teams along the way. When I got engaged to my first husband, I adopted his team, the Dolphins. My second husband is from Buffalo, and I root for the Bills if they're not playing the Giants.

Understanding football makes it more enjoyable to watch. The men I've been around for most of my football watching were usually too caught up in the game to explain how it's played. I learned a lot from my first roommate, Debbie Murphy, who knew a lot about football because her brother played in high school and college. I learned more when I was married to my first husband, from the total immersion that began in our house with the annual draft and continued through training camp, pre-, regular and post-season play. Spreads, over/under, who was favored, who was injured, who would win and why, how the Dolphins did in the past season, what their prospects were in the next season - there was football talk all year. My ex-husband subscribed to Dolphin Digest, reads The Sporting News, watches all the games televised, attends Dolphin games (and tapes those that are televised), and reads whichever newspaper has the best sports coverage. When I lived in Fort Lauderdale, a group of guys (Don, Rick, Gary, Arun, and Russ, occasionally Ron, Chuck, John, and Carl) would watch the games at our house. (And yes, they did this for college games too.) Fortunately I enjoyed the game, and learned a lot from all this.

The result is this guide.

I hope you learn to enjoy football as much as I do.

HOW THE GAME IS PLAYED

There are four 15 minute **QUARTERS**, and one 12 minute **HALFTIME**. If the game is tied at the end of four quarters the game goes into **OVERTIME**.

College Football Overtime is a 15 minute quarter, and both teams get a chance to play. If the overtime quarter ends with the score still tied, additional overtime quarters are played, with each team getting a chance to play, until one team wins.

Pro Football (NFL) Overtime is one 15 minute quarter, and is played in the **SUDDEN DEATH** format. This means that the team that wins the toss can choose to kick or receive. The first team to score wins, even if it's the team that receives the first kickoff. There is only one overtime quarter in the regular season, and the game ends in a tie if neither team scores. Ties in football are rare. During playoffs, additional overtime periods are played until one team wins.

Each team has three **TIMEOUTS** per half. In overtime, each team gets two timeouts. Timeouts do not carry over. (For example, a team only uses one timeout in the first half. They cannot carry over the two they didn't use into the second half.) Injury timeouts are not charged to a team unless they occur during the final two minutes of the second and fourth quarters. (Why? Years ago players would fake an injury in the last two minutes of the second and fourth quarters if the team had no timeouts remaining, to buy some time.)

The team with the ball is the **OFFENSE**. They try to score points. The team defending the end zone is the **DEFENSE**. They try to prevent points, force turnovers, take advantage of turnovers, and score.

Each team is allowed 11 players on the field. It is a penalty to have more, but if a team gets caught with less there is no penalty, although it is a handicap to have fewer players on the field.

Each team defends one **END ZONE**. The field between their end zone and the 50 yard line is their territory. The ball generally starts somewhere in a team's own territory. To score, the offense must move the ball from their territory into their opponent's, and cross their opponent's goal line.

A coin toss by an official, called by team captains in the center of the field, decides which team will kick and which team will receive. The kicking team lines up for the **KICKOFF**. The ball is kicked from their 35 yard line to the opposite end zone (65 yards away). If the ball crosses the goal line, it is a **TOUCHBACK**. This means the ball is brought back to the 20 yard line of the receiving team, and the offense starts playing from their own territory. If the ball does not cross the goal line and hits the ground, it is played from the point where it stops. If the ball crosses the goal line while rolling, it is a touchback.

A player may catch the ball after the kickoff. If he signals **FAIR CATCH**, he will not run to get closer to the opposite goal line. The ball is played from the yard line where the ball is caught.