

Offside–Has it Changed?

FIFA issued a media release dated 29 October 2003 regarding a decision reached by the International Football Association Board (IFAB) at their September 16th Annual Business Meeting. The decision was passed “in order to ensure uniform interpretation of Law 11: Offside.” The stated aim of the decision being “to respect the Laws of the Game and to protect attacking play intended to lead to a goal, which is the ultimate objective in football.” It was further stated that “This is not a change to the Laws of the Game as this interpretation adheres entirely to the original wording of the Law.”

The 29 October 2003 FIFA Media Release

The media release was titled “*Laws of the Game: more detailed interpretation of Law 11: Offside.*” The text follows:

Law 11 reads as follows: "A player in an offside position is only penalised if, at the moment the ball is touched or played by one of his team, he is, in the opinion of the referee, involved in active play by:

- *interfering with play, or*
- *interfering with an opponent, or*
- *gaining an advantage by being in that position."*

How to interpret:

"interfering with play"

PLAYING OR TOUCHING a ball passed or touched by a team-mate.

"interfering with an opponent"

PREVENTING an opponent from playing or being able to play the ball. For example, by clearly obstructing the goalkeeper's line of vision or movements.

Making a gesture or movement while standing in the path of the ball to DECEIVE OR DISTRACT AN OPPONENT.

"gaining an advantage by being in that position"

PLAYING A BALL that rebounds off a post or the crossbar having been in an offside position.

PLAYING A BALL that rebounds off an opponent having been in an offside position.

With these clearer instructions, the referees will be in a better position to make informed decisions based on uniform criteria. However, as stipulated in the Laws of the Game, the referee's decision is final.

New Interpretation?

Is this a change in the interpretation of the Offside Law? Must the assistant referee wait until the player in the offside position touches or plays the ball before raising the flag? This *seems* to be the intent of this IFAB decision on how to interpret “interfering with play.” But is it?

Historic Interpretation

The traditional interpretation has always been that when a ball is played by a teammate *toward* a player in an offside position (unless the player is making it obvious that he or she is not going to be involved in play), that player is called offside. This is the interpretation reinforced in the excellent video “Making the Offside Call,” produced in 2001 by the USSF’s National Program for Referee Development. The video clips used are from Women’s World Cup ’99.

In the first scenario (USA-DEN) of the video the assistant referee (AR) almost immediately raises her flag when the ball is passed in the direction of a teammate in an offside position. In two other matches (ITA-MEX and NOR-BRA) the ARs are again shown almost immediately raising their flags, and not waiting for the player in the offside position to play or touch the ball.

There is also an incident (CHN-USA) where a player in an offside position but by her body language trying to avoid being called offside is still penalized for interfering with play by “being in the active area of involvement.”

There are additional examples where a player in an offside position, but not in an area of active play, is moving to indicate she is not participating and the AR correctly keeps her flag down.

What Do We Teach?

The examples given above are consistent with both AYSO and USSF instructional programs. But offside interpretation has been changing over recent years, and often without rewording of the Law—the recent interpretation given by the IFAB is not inconsistent with Law 11’s text.

It does reinforce that ARs should delay raising their flags in order to correctly assess whether a player should be penalized for an offside offence. FIFA intent, through the IFAB Annual General Meeting, was said to be to standardize the application as a result of questions received from some countries. I have been told that the FIFA memo was intended to give *examples* of the application, but that they are not exhaustive. I have also been told that, for the present, we should “play this information very low key.”

So what do we instruct our referees? It is important that we have uniform interpretation of the Laws and not react to perceived changes in interpretation. Unless we receive additional clarification, we should assume that there has been no change. And until the United States Soccer Federation receives direction otherwise, we must continue teaching Offside as we have been, and as shown in USSF’s video “Making the Offside Call.”

As a final note, I like this interpretation, and look forward to receiving further clarification. But until we do, it is important that we stay the course.

Bill Mason, FIFA Law Interpreter,
AYSO Referee Commission, October 30, 2003