

New Jersey Football Officials Association

North Jersey Chapter

Force – A Federation discussion

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Let's start by first defining what "force" is. Don't bother digging through the basement for your high school physics textbook. Simply, force is the result of energy exerted by a player which provides movement of the ball. Every time the ball moves during a game, a 'force' is being exerted on it. The good news is that we, as officials, rarely need to care about force. From a rules perspective, in the vast majority of situations, force has no bearing on the rulings we need to make on the field. For example, when a QB throws a forward pass, force is exerted upon the ball by the passer. If the pass goes from A's 20 to A's 35, that 'force' is of no material significance. However, all of that nonchalance regarding force changes when force takes the ball from the field of play across a goal line and into an end zone—either end zone. That's when force begins to matter—big time. Then we need to know who (which team) supplied the force, i.e. who was responsible for exerting the force which put the ball across the goal line and into the end zone.

That brings us to the discussion of how a player exerts force on a ball. The rules specify a few ways that the initial force can be exerted. That can happen when a player carries, fumbles, kicks, passes or snaps the ball across a goal line into an end zone. But what if a ball is loose? Can a new force be exerted on it that supersedes or renders the initial force expended and immaterial? Yes. And rules tell us that after a backward pass, fumble, or kick has been grounded, a new force may result. And the rules also tell us how the new force may be imparted. They say that the new force can result from a bat, an illegal kick or a muff of the loose ball.

Notice some key things about the criteria for a new force. First, it says that a new force may be imparted after a backward pass, fumble, or kick has been **grounded**. This implicitly means that you can't add a new force to a kick, pass (forward or backward), or fumble in flight. The rules actually explicitly state this as well in rule 2-13-3. Another very important thing that the criteria say is that a new force may be added by a muff, bat, or illegal kick. The key word there is 'may'. A muff, bat, or illegal kick of a loose ball that moves that ball into an end zone is not **automatically** a new force. It must be judged so by the covering official. So what does the official do to make that judgment?

The Federation rules are not specific as to how that judgment should be made, as opposed to the NCAA rules where it is very clear and doesn't really involve much judgment at all. A good rule of thumb—in my opinion—is this: Remember that a football is an odd shape and can randomly change direction often as it is bouncing. For that reason, my judgment says that unless the ball is moving rapidly away from a goal line or is at rest (or nearly so) in the field of play, any muff, bat, or illegal kick that puts the ball into the end zone will not be considered a new force. My philosophy also says that if Team A puts the ball on the ground, their play is flawed and I'm giving Team B the benefit of the doubt if he is last to touch (muff) a loose ball that enters an end zone. I'm inclined to leave the force with Team A if it's possible to do so. I don't want B to suffer as a result of A's fumble. But like I said, if the ball is at rest or if it's moving away from the end zone with no opportunity for it to reverse direction on its own, and then B muffs it back into the end zone, I'd be compelled to rule a new force attributed to Team B (as much as I'd hate to do so).

Oh...and two other 'special' force rules:

1. On a free kick or a scrimmage kick, force is of no significance for any kick entering R's end zone. In all such cases, the result of the play is a touchback and there's no need to even consider force. Some folks will say there's no such thing as 'force' when a kick enters R's end zone. Not true. A force does still exist, but there's no significance to that

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force that will influence your ruling. Note however, that force most definitely does have significance if a kick enters K's end zone.

2. Force is also not a factor if a loose ball resulting from a fumble or backward pass is blown dead (not inadvertently) in the end zone of the opponent of the passing/fumbling team with no player in possession. All such situations result in a touchdown for the passing/fumbling team. Don't worry too much about this one. You're not likely to ever see such a thing.

Let's take a look at some play situations where a determination of force is needed:

PLAY: A, 4-10 from A's 15. A11's punt from A's 4 is blocked and rebounds into and through A's end zone. **RULING:** Safety. Initial force is the kick. A new force cannot be added to a kick in flight. B's block of the punt cannot be considered a new force. A's kick is responsible for the ball entering As' end zone.

PLAY: A, 4-5 from A's 15. A11's short punt from A's 4 is muffed in flight by receiver B2 at A's 20. It rebounds untouched into A's end zone where A55 recovers. **RULING:** Safety. Initial force is the kick. A new force cannot be added to a kick in flight—even though the muff occurred beyond the neutral zone. A's kick is responsible for the ball entering As' end zone.

PLAY: A, 3-15 from A's 10. QB A10 turns and throws a quick backward pass to WR A88. Defender B22 steps into the passing lane and deflects the ball which rolls into A's end zone and then out of bounds. **RULING:** Safety. Initial force is the pass. A new force cannot be added to a pass in flight. A's pass is responsible for the ball entering As' end zone.

PLAY: K's scrimmage kick from midfield is rolling around R's 5. Seeing that K might be able to recover and down the ball inside the 5, receiver R33 kicks the loose ball at his 4 into and through his own end zone. **RULING:** Result of the play is a touchback. Even though it may have been the illegal kick providing the force which put the ball into R's end zone, it's immaterial since force has no significance on kicks entering R's end zone. Yes, you do have a foul for an illegal kick which will be enforced under PSK enforcement procedures. But there's no possibility for a safety in this play contrary to what a lot of people—including some officials—think.

PLAY: 2nd and 10 from A's 3. The snap is mishandled by A12. The loose ball is rolling in A's end zone. Defender B60 attempts to recover, but his muff drives the ball across the end line. **RULING:** Safety. A's snap is the force that put the ball into the end zone. The ball then became dead behind the goal line while still in Team A's possession. That it was a B player who muffed the ball through A's end zone and across the end line has no bearing on the ruling.

PLAY: A's ball 3-Goal from B's 8. A11 carries to B's 4 where he is hit and fumbles. (a) The ball is rolling toward the end zone, or (b) The ball comes to rest on B's 2, or (c) The ball is rolling parallel to the goal line, or (d) The fumbled ball is in flight above B's 2-yard line. In each case, B55 muffs the ball which crosses the goal line into B's end zone. B76 recovers the loose ball on the ground in the end zone. **RULING:** Touchback in (a) and (d). In (a), the official should not judge a new force to B55's muff since the ball was rolling toward B's end zone and may very well have entered the end zone without the muff. In (d), you can't attribute a new force to the muff of a fumble in flight. So the initial force (A's fumble) is responsible for the ball being in B's end zone. In (b), result is a safety. Since the ball was at rest, official is justified ruling a new force on B55's muff. B is therefore responsible for putting the ball into his own end zone. In (c), here's where philosophy needs to be combined with good judgment. The covering official must judge whether B55's muff was a new force. Since A put the ball on the carpet with his fumble, I'm

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giving B the benefit of the doubt here. I would not rule B55's muff a new force, instead leaving the initial force of A11's fumble unexpended and therefore responsible for the ball entering B's end zone. My ruling would be a touchback. When in question whether to rule a new force or not, rule that no new force has been added.

Hope this helps somewhat.