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**NFL**

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# NFL Rule Changes: Why they’re needed

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The debate over the rule changes in the National Football League has been a [consistent dispute](https://www.nfl.com/news/nfl-rule-changes-cause-controversy-draw-ire-0ap1000000152262) among NFL fans, players, and officials over the past decade. This debate re-ignites itself at the very beginning of each football season. During the off-season of each year, the NFL releases a statement on their [NFL Operations website](https://operations.nfl.com/) that highlights the rule changes prior to the upcoming season.

Concussions and leg injuries have been the points of contention in the past few decades in the NFL; the league has implemented a few specific rules that has created discourse. The issue lies in the fact that some believe these rules create injuries and they’re not

A yellow penalty flag flies as New Orleans Saints safety Marcus Williams is penalized while against Minnesota Vikings wide receiver Stefon Diggs. Jamie Squire/Getty Images

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# 'What’s Changed?’

While some agree that some changes might prevent injuries, [they also may create some in the process.](https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/science/article/pii/S0167629617300541)  A ‘good play’ before a rule change can potentially be identified as a penalty after the rule implementation, possibly changing ways the game is played for the better or worse. Officials and health researchers take the contrary view on these rule changes, believing that the rule changes that have been implemented decrease player injuries and have had a beneficial effect on the league.

My argument considers each point of view and combines the best of both worlds. This take on rule changes in the NFL will benefit players, fans, and officials.

# EDITOR'S PICK

[Raven’s safety: Refs ‘harping’ on helmet rule](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/24271124/bennett-jackson-baltimore-ravens-says-refs-flagged-team-make-people-aware-helmet-rule)

Some of the rules that have been controversially implemented into to the game will be discussed throughout the entirety of the article. The rules included are the following: Crown of the helmet rule (CHR), chop-block rule, kickoff rule, and roughing the passer rule.

[The CHR rule](https://www.nfl.com/news/new-nfl-rules-crown-of-helmet-change-to-help-runner-defender-0ap1000000238662), first introduced in the 2013 football season, is a ban on a ball carrier initiating contact with the crown of his helmet in the open field or by a defender while making a tackle.

[The chop-block rule](https://operations.nfl.com/the-rules/nfl-video-rulebook/chop-block/#:~:text=Rule%20Summary%20View%20Official%20Rule&text=A%20Chop%20Block%20is%20a,defensive%20player%20above%20the%20waist.), introduced before the 2016 football season, made the football maneuver in which an offensive player blocks an opponent around the thigh while another offensive player engages the same opponent above the waist illegal.

necessary. Many players and fans believe implementing major rules [alters the origin of American Football](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/24318483/how-nfl-latest-safety-measures-face-resistance-players-helmet-rule-concussions), believing the league is taking things too far in some instances. Also believing that these implementations are changing the game to an extent that’s out of reach.

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# EDITOR'S PICK

[NFL coaches join fans in angst over ‘nefarious’ catch rule](https://www.espn.com/blog/nflnation/post/_/id/200657/nfl-coaches-join-fans-in-angst-over-nefarious-catch-rule)

[The kickoff rule](https://operations.nfl.com/the-rules/nfl-video-rulebook/kickoff-rules/), first implemented in college football, was integrated into the NFL in the 2019 season; part of the rule states that players on the kicking team will not be allowed to receive a running start and will have to wait to run down the field towards the opposing team until the ball is kicked.

Lasty, introduced in the 2018 season was the [roughing the passer rule](https://operations.nfl.com/the-rules/nfl-video-rulebook/roughing-the-passer/#:~:text=When%20tackling%20a%20passer%20who,most%20of%20the%20defender's%20weight.): when tackling a passer who is in a defenseless position, a defensive player must not unnecessarily or violently throw him down or land on top of him with all or most of the defender's weight.

[In the league’s early days](https://operations.nfl.com/the-rules/evolution-of-the-nfl-rules/), the game of football was played much differently. And subsequently, officiating and rules were significantly different. New rules are needed to adapt to a consistently changing league. “The impetus for a major rule change can come from almost anywhere – controversies over plays or players, unusual circumstances and trends in scoring, injuries and penalties,” says NFL Operations staff members. The league is meant to be altered and people need to realize this.

Now, during a critical time in the NFL where the foundation is receiving an exceptional amount of backlash on concussion protocol, knee injuries, and overall player protection from the football community, it’s important that the players are playing in a league that is in the safest possible state. The NFL is committed to making this sport a fair, safe, and competitive environment for its players without changing the game drastically.

# 'Back to the Roots’

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Players and fans need to adapt to the [NFL’s wide ranging “call to action”](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/22603654/nfl-doctor-says-rising-concussion-numbers-sparks-call-action) on player injuries and it’s imperative to address injury trends early. [JC Tretter](https://www.espn.com/nfl/player/_/id/16001/jc-tretter), entering his tenth year in the NFL and his fourth as the [Cleveland Browns'](https://www.espn.com/nfl/team/_/name/cle/cleveland-browns) center, speaks out his opinion on the new changes.

“I think eventually people will realize that the NFL is not changing the core of football,” he said. “We’re just trying to make sure that guys aren’t going to be in trouble 30 years down the line.”

"We love playing the game, and it's given us a lot. It's given us a lot of popularity and fame and money and the ability to play the game we love, travel the world, see a bunch of cities. But there is no reason not to continue to try to make the game safer. Just because you're getting a lot of great things out of it doesn't mean there needs to be a huge drawback."

Defensive lineman, Leonard Marshall of the New York Giants, rejoices after hitting quarterback Joe Montana (lying on the ground) of the San Francisco 49ers Robert Riger/Getty Images

On the contrary, players want to make their own decisions on how they play the game. One condition for the [Crown of the Helmet rule](https://www.nfl.com/news/new-nfl-rules-crown-of-helmet-change-to-help-runner-defender-0ap1000000238662) was a ban on certain helmets. The CHR rule, first introduced in the 2013 football season, is a ban on a ball carrier initiating contact with the crown of his helmet in the open field or by a defender while making a tackle.

[Eric Weddle](https://www.espn.com/nfl/player/_/id/10481/eric-weddle), Baltimore Raven’s free safety at the time, was upset to learn that his previous helmet, which he found comfortable to wear and wanted to continue using, was banned. “It's my head. It's the helmet I want, that's done well for me. How does [an engineering firm] know what's best for me?" he asked.

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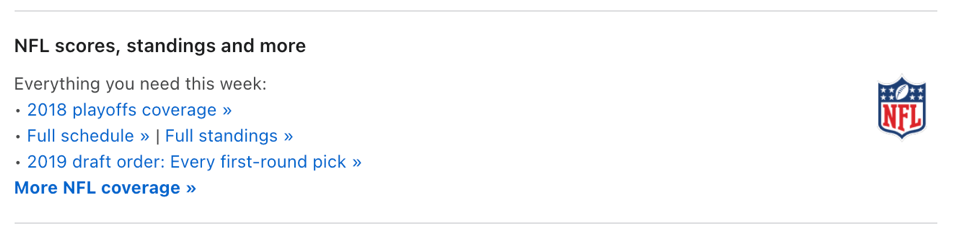
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Most of the players think that that the tension will eventually pass, as it has with previous controversial NFL rule changes. Without changing the core of football, the NFL has done a great job implementing some rules in the league that has been beneficial.

Rich McKay, the chairman of the NFL competition committee, [hears the complaints from players and fans](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/24318483/how-nfl-latest-safety-measures-face-resistance-players-helmet-rule-concussions). McKay fully expects some growing pains after each controversial rule change; however, he’s convinced that players will settle in with new rules just fine.

“We know there is going to be calls [each] year that people are going to complain about it. There's always that, and I feel bad for the officials because they're the ones that always get the scrutiny. But the adjustment period will be shorter than people think. I think the players understand that ultimately…the rules that will develop over the coming years…are all driven by one simple idea, which is the helmet needs to be used as a protective device – period”, he says.

# ‘It all depends on how they’re implemented’

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One of the longtime perspectives on these changes is that some rules should be applied differently by game officials due to its controversy. Even though the NFL says that they are committed to making the game fair, competitive and exciting, some argue that the roughing the passer rule isn’t fair for defensive players.

After enforcing the new rule in the 2018 season, [the NFL received constant backlash](https://www.espn.com/blog/nflnation/post/_/id/283949/nfl-roughing-the-passer-problem-isnt-getting-worse-week-5-2018) from NFL fans, players, and various other sources. During the year of the new implementation, [Clay Matthews](https://www.espn.com/nfl/player/_/id/12438/clay-matthews) was the highlight of the league and became the origin of something great the league did that year.

Clay Matthews of the Green Bay Packers tackles Russell Wilson of the Seattle Seahawks with the weight of his body Christian Petersen/Getty Images

When tackling the quarterback, [Matthews landed on top of him](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/24704560/roughing-passer-penalties-control-unbelievable-flag) with most of his weight but with his hands up in the air, trying not to initiate contact. This happened multiple times towards the end of the game and the calls gave the opposing team position on the field for them to have a chance to win.

These calls made players and fans furious. Clay Matthews argued that what was seen was a normal football play and the NFL was becoming soft. He states, “I don’t run the league office, but you’d like to see football be football. Football has hard hits. It’s a physical game. It’s not for the faint of heart. We get after one another… It’s going in the wrong direction”

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After the game, in which the opposing team won, the league responded. Ultimately, the NFL addressed the situation in response of the controversy it made. [The calls made weren’t inconsistent](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/11629768/referees-union-criticizes-nfl-inconsistency-calls) with how the rule was intended to be enforced and the number of calls made were curbed significantly for the duration of the season.

The surge of calls that year got the NFL’s attention, and it shows. This is a prime example of the NFL working with players and fans. Calls inconsistent with how the rule is intended to be enforced and the number of calls made can be curbed significantly if the implementations could be altered in favor for both sides. [Modifying rules](https://operations.nfl.com/the-rules/rules-changes/health-safety-rules-changes/) with minor rule adjustments could ultimately have an advantageous impact on the NFL’s community.

# ‘Do they really help with player safety?’

While the NFL does a great job with some of the rule changes like above, there are others that have had no effect on player safety, failing to make the game safer. Some of the league’s various rule changes over the years have failed to reduce injury trends.

A study done by [BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine](https://bmjopensem.bmj.com/content/6/1/e000684), argues that the results of the changes have been far too minimal to prove to be successful or not. This study claims that there hasn’t been a significant change, positive nor negative, in the number of injuries amongst NFL with some of the changes.

Studies are believed to take years to see the desired results and results cannot be based solely on the season right after implementation. It has become a trend that the reduction of injuries does not appear to persist over subsequent seasons. The first year after the rule change, there are significant results; however, the following seasons after, there doesn’t seem to be a big change in the results from before the rule change.

The NFL [believed that kickoffs were a huge source of concussions](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/03/28/could-the-nfl-ban-kickoffs-concussion-concerns-have-idea-moving-closer-to-reality/). The league implemented a rule in hopes to decrease injuries: the league disallowed players to get a running start and moved the ball from the 30-yard line to the 35-yard line to encourage kickers to kick in the endzone more often, resulting in touchbacks and not allowing the returner to run down the field.

The leagues’ current implementations may have had no long-term effect on the game. This impact was only significant for a single season, leveling out afterwards. The well-intentioned rule adopted by the league has proven to be too weak in making the game of football safer.

The NFL needs to figure out why some rule changes only have a major effect on the first season after the implementation. Continuing to implement these unnecessary rule changes could create more discourse in the following seasons and have fans consistently complain about a yellow flag on the football field.

As for what the NFL can do to help solve this issue, Dr. Sheth, one of the co-authors of the research article and Associate Professor within the University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering, argues that its simple.

“Figure out why rule changes to protect the player only appear, at best, to work for one season but not over subsequent seasons. I have no idea [why this] could be happening – maybe the teams learn to work around the new rules with new plays or schemes or just learn to conceal the infractions better, or the new rules are not as strictly enforced over subsequent seasons, or any number of other reasons…More rigorous rules, in general, sounds like a good idea”, he says.

A football player running with a football

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# ‘Looking for Beneficial Effects’

# EDITOR'S PICK

[The NFL’s rule tweaks are saving the kickoff from extinction](https://www.espn.com/blog/nflnation/post/_/id/287320/the-nfl-rule-tweaks-saving-kickoff-from-extinction)

# ‘The CHR Rule’

A single concussion after recovery can cause persistent headaches, sleep depravity, and sleep disorders. Head-related injuries have become more apparent in the NFL, supporting why the league must respond to the media and players about these concerns quickly over the past decade.

The NFL implemented the Crown-of-the-Helmet Rule (CHR). This rule changes how players initiate contact on the field, disallowing players to lead with the crown of their helmet during a tackle.

Regarding the negative long-term health effects of concussions, leg injuries and their awareness in the NFL, it’s apparent why the league must respond to the media and players about these concerns.

Most rule changes in the league have had a beneficial outcome for players based on the assumption that research on these changes is needed to prove to the audience that the implementations in the last decade are advantageous.

A person standing at a podium

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Rich McKay, chairman of the NFL Competition Committee, offered his input after the rule was passed:

“We really think the time has come that we need to address the situation in space when a runner or a tackler has a choice as to how they are going to approach the opponent. We are going to say that you can't make that choice ducking your head and delivering a blow, a forcible blow, with the top crown of your helmet. We are trying to protect the runner or the tackler from himself in that instance.”

Rich McKay, Chairman of the NFL Competition Committee, during a press conference regarding rule changes at the 2018 NFL Annual Meetings at the Ritz Carlton Orlando, Florida. *B51/Mark Brown/Getty Images*

Andrew Hanson, a Marquette researcher, examines the intended and unintended effects of the new policy in his article, [“Safety Regulation in Professional Football: Empirical Evidence of Intended and Unintended Consequences”](https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/science/article/pii/S0167629617300541), using a study that implements models that estimates the weekly effect of the CHR on player injurious in the NFL.

With players’ focus off the head, the defense now tends to tackle lower on their opponent’s body after the change. This creates an unintended effect of the policy, offensive players having a higher probability of experiencing lower-body injuries.

They found a reduction in weekly concussion reports by as much as 32% among defensive players. A reduction of 34% of neck and head injuries in general was also discovered. This data alone shows that the rule changes in the league have had a beneficial outcome for players.

However, there was also evidence of an increase in weekly lower extremity injuries for offensive players by roughly 34%. This cost/benefit analysis shows how the rules intentions were very beneficial for player safety; however, the unintended effects of this change were not.

Essentially, this data weighs the pros and cons of a rule change and looks for a median in the policy. Hanson offers that idea that this rule created injuries while also limiting some, saying that the only way to solve this issue is to continue trying to find rules that will strictly benefit players. Reducing unintended effects and modifying rules with minor rule adjustments could ultimately have a larger impact on the NFL’s community.

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When addressing the chop-block rule, the NFL rule change has reduced knee/ankle injuries among defensive players based on the assumption that research on this rule change is needed to prove to the audience that the implementations are advantageous. Otherwise, fans will only see a flag on the field and argue that the penalty was nonsense.

Hayden P. Baker, the author of the article, [“The NFL’s Chop-Block Rule Change: Does It Prevent Knee Injuries in Defensive Players?”](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2325967118768446), quantifies the impact that the chop-block rule had on players. Specifically, Baker quantifies how the rule altered incidences of knee injuries among defensive players in the NFL.

# ‘The Chop-Block Rule’

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# ‘Conclusion’

This technique is lethal and chop blocks and leg/knee injuries were directly associated. This new rule implemented by the league decreased leg ligament injuries by a drastic amount. In his study, Baker found a relative risk reduction by 16%.

Knee injuries are one of the most common injuries among football players. And this rule implemented has reduced these incidences by a drastic amount, suggesting that this rule should not be repealed.

The NFL is proving to be committed to making this sport a fair, safe, and competitive environment for its players without changing the game drastically. While these rules create discourse among fans and players, the realization of how these rules have been mostly beneficial for the league needs to be a point of emphasis.

It is possible to simultaneously enjoy football while also being critical of its safety aspects with the right research. If the players in the NFL want to continue playing football and if fans want to resume watching these players, then people need to realize this.

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