

40 & 25-Second Play Clock Rules and Mechanics

The play clock is used to ensure that each team be given a consistent interval between plays and from game to game. A visible play clock is not authorized for use in California.

Both a 40-second and a 25-second play clock are used. Unless the game is stopped for administrative reasons (e.g., change of possession, penalty, injury, clock error, etc.), the offensive team has 40 seconds to snap the ball after the previous play ends. After administrative stoppages, a 25-second play clock is used. With a 40-second play clock, the ball is ready for play when an official spots the ball and steps away to his position. The 40-second play clock has significantly standardized the time the offense has to put the ball into play in both NCAA and NFL play.

Here are some examples beginning with a common scenario. **Table 1** shows more scenarios.

EXAMPLE 1: A32 runs for a one-yard gain and is tackled inbounds (a) short of, or (b) beyond the line-to-gain. **RULING:** In either case, a 40-second play clock is started immediately when the ball is declared dead. In (a), the game clock continues to run. The referee does not give a ready signal or any other clock signal. In (b), the game clock stops. The referee signals “first down,” the ball is spotted and the referee then signals to start the game clock with a silent wind. The referee does not wait for the chains to be set before starting the clock.

On a fourth-down play that results in a change of possession, the clock is stopped to award Team B a first down, the game clock will stop, and the referee will blow his whistle and signal ready-for-play for a 25-second play clock.

EXAMPLE 2: A11 throws an incomplete pass. **RULING:** A 40-second play clock is started immediately when the ball is declared dead and the game clock stops. The game clock will start on the snap and there is no overt referee signal.

EXAMPLE 3: A24 runs out of bounds (a) short of, or (b) beyond the line-to-gain. **RULING:** In both cases, a 40-second play clock is started immediately when the ball is declared dead and the game clock stops. The game clock will start on the snap and there is no overt referee signal. In (b), the referee signals a first down.

As illustrated in the preceding three examples, if a play ends beyond the line-to-gain without a foul, a 40-second play clock is used. The game clock is still stopped for the ball to be spotted, but that is not considered an administrative stoppage.

The following is a prime example of an administrative stoppage.

EXAMPLE 4: A11 throws an incomplete pass. A79 is flagged for holding. **RULING:** The clock stops for the incomplete pass. After the penalty is administered, the ready-for-play is blown and a 25-second play clock is started. The game clock starts on the snap.

Administrative issues are situations such as the chains getting tangled up or broken, dry ball not brought in time, etc. This stoppage is not intended to allow for additional time needed to break up scraps between players. Statements like “Play clock is running” can be used as an aide to assist in getting players back to huddle.

Table 1

Event *	Play Clock Starts at	Game Clock Starts on	Covering Official's Signal	Referee's Signal
Dead ball inbounds	40	Running	S7	None
Dead ball out of bounds	40	Snap	S3	None
Incomplete pass	40	Snap	S10	None
Team A awarded 1st down (inbounds)	40	Signal	S3	Wind
Team A awarded 1st down (out-of-bounds)	40	Snap	S3	None
Penalty administration	25	Ready	S3	Wind
Charged team timeout	25	Snap	S3	Chop
Injury/Helmet off	25	Ready	S3	Wind
Measurement	25	Ready	S3	Wind
Double Change of possession- Team A snaps	40	Ready	S3	Wind
Change of possession- Team B snaps	25	Snap	S3	Chop
Touchdown	25	N/A	S5	Chop
Try, FG, Safety	25	Varies**	Varies* *	Chop
Start of each period	25	Snap	N/A	Chop
Legal kick	25	Snap	S3	Chop
Start of an overtime period	25	N/A	N/A	Chop
Other administrative stoppage ***	25	Ready	S3	Wind

* If event does not occur in conjunction with any other event that stops the clock.

** The game clock will start on the free kick by rule.

*** Includes inadvertent whistle and period extension.

S3 is stop the clock, S7 is “dead ball - start play clock,” S10 is incomplete pass.

Notes:

1. If B intercepts then fumbles and A recovers, it is a 40-sec play clock.
2. On a 4th down fake punt, if A is short of line-to-gain, it is a 25-sec play clock because B snaps next.
3. On a 4th down fake punt, if A is beyond line-to-gain, it is a 40-sec play clock; same as any other first down for A.

If there is an appreciable delay in spotting the ball and the play clock is down to 20 seconds, the play clock should be reset to 25 seconds. When there is no visible play clock the referee should approximate this interval and use his best judgment. When in doubt, reset the play clock. The referee will do this by stopping the game clock and signaling (both palms open in an over-the-head pumping motion) that the play clock should be re-set at 25 seconds. The game clock will start by rule either on the ready-for-play signal or the snap.

When the 40-second play clock is running, the effective ready-for-play is the spotting of the ball. The impacted rules are: 2-25-1 (establishment of the line of scrimmage), 2-28-1 (establishment of the neutral zone), 2-26-5 (establishment of the line-to-gain), 2-8 and 7-1-5 (encroachment), 5-3-1 (designation of a new series), 7-1-3 (snapper restrictions), 7-1-7 (false start), and 7-2-1 (nine-yard mark compliance).

Additional Examples

1. During a down that ends inbounds, B55's helmet comes off without a helmet foul by Team A. B55 immediately picks up his helmet, puts it on and continues to chase the ball carrier. **RULING:** An illegal participation foul by B55 for continuing to participate after losing his helmet. The clock stops at the end of the down and B55 must leave the game for the next down. After the penalty is enforced, the play clock is set at 25 seconds and both clocks start on the referee's whistle.
2. Team B trails by three points with 40 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter and the game clock is running. A22 runs and is tackled inbounds short of a first down, but (a) A63's, or (b) B44's helmet comes completely off during the play. The game clock reads 0:33. **RULING:** In either case, the play clock will be set at 25 seconds and the game clock is started on the ready. Team A must snap the ball to avoid a delay of game foul.
3. Second and 14 at the A-25. A33 gains six yards and is tackled inbounds. The Line Judge mistakes the back stake for the front stake and erroneously stops the clock. **RULING:** Although a 40-second play clock will start as soon as the ball is dead, the Referee will handle this as an administrative stoppage. As soon as the error is detected, the play clock will be set at 25 seconds and the game clock is started.
4. During the down B77 is injured. A44 is tackled inbounds. When the clock is stopped for the injury, it reads 0:58 in the fourth quarter. **RULING:** The play clock is set to 25 seconds and both clocks are started on the ready.
5. With the game clock running, Team A allows the play clock to run down. **RULING:** Team B may accept or decline a five-yard penalty for delay of game. In either case, the play clock will be set at 25 seconds. If the penalty is accepted, the game clock starts on the snap. If the penalty is declined, the game clock starts on the ready.

Mechanics

Responsibilities. The 40-second play clock is maintained by the Back Judge in a 5-man crew and by the Referee in a 4-man or 3-man crew. The play clock starts as soon as the play ends and the ball is dead.

Starting the play clock. The covering official's signal will designate when to start the play clock. When the ball is declared dead, the play clock starts when the following signals are given (only one signal is used):

- a) The dead ball signal (S7) to indicate the play has ended inbounds. The covering official will raise his arm straight up for two-to-three seconds.
- b) The start-the-clock signal (S2) to indicate the play has ended inbounds near the sideline.
- c) The stop-the-clock signal (S3) to indicate the play has ended out of bounds.
- d) The incomplete pass signal (S10).

Re-set. If the play clock is interrupted, it will always be reset to 25 seconds. The signal is one arm with open palm pumped into the air – "push the sky". If the ball is not spotted with approximately 20 seconds remaining on the play clock, the referee will re-set the play clock by whistling the ready-for-play.

Countdown. The following signaling technique will be used for the benefit of coaches and players for both a 40-second and 25-second play clock. In a 5-man crew, the signaling official will be the Back Judge and for a 4-man crew, it will be the Referee.

The arm will be raised with 5 seconds remaining, followed immediately by a lateral swing of the arm to indicate each second in the final 5-second countdown. In a 4-man or 3-man crew, the Referee will provide the countdown signals.

Chain Crew. When the 40-second count applies, the ball can be snapped as soon as it is spotted. That requires the "box man" to hustle to the next spot after instructed by the Head Linesman. If the box is not in place when the snap is imminent, the Head Linesman will drop a bean bag to indicate the placement of the box. Under no circumstances will the play clock be re-set to 25-seconds because of a slow chain crew.

First down inbounds. When a first down is gained and the play ends inbounds, the clock stops to award the new series but the 40-second play clock starts when the ball becomes dead (it is not an administrative stoppage). Although the ball normally can be snapped as soon as it is spotted, in this special case, it cannot be snapped until the game clock is re-started. Thus the Umpire will stand over the ball to prevent a snap until the Referee signals the game clock to start with a silent wind (no whistle) and the Umpire confirms it has started.

If the clock operator does not respond, the Referee may blow his whistle to get the clock operator's attention. Such a whistle does not re-set the play clock. If the clock operator still doesn't respond, the Referee will signal timeout and re-set the play clock to 25 seconds.