



# FOOTBALL

A beginner's guide





Congratulations! Your kid is thinking about playing Football. While trying a new sport can be a bit scary for all involved, we know that once you get started, you and your child are going to love it.

American football originated in North American colleges in the late 19th century as a derivative of British sports rugby and soccer. While it hasn't been able to get much of a foothold on a worldwide scale, it continues to be one of the most popular sports in the United States with over 5 million participants over the age of six.

While the idea of your child participating in football may seem overwhelming, it's important to understand that youth tackle football is much different than at the collegiate or professional level. They have more ways to participate, including non-contact versions like flag football, limited contact games like TackleBar, or padded flag football. Each game type has a continued focus on improving fundamentals, having fun, and safety. This guide has all the information you and your child need to get started.



**DESPITE BEING CALLED A "PIGSKIN," FOOTBALLS ARE ACTUALLY MADE FROM LEATHER, OR COWHIDE.**



## THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FOOTBALL

Before your child steps onto the field, it's helpful to understand the basics of the game and what to expect.



### Field of Play

Football is almost always played on natural grass or artificial turf fields. These fields can range from 120 yards long and 53.3 yards wide to 40 yards long and 35.5 yards wide. The last 10 yards on each end of

the field are designated as the end zones, which have field goal posts set on the outside.

Many programs have teams play from the 40-yard line to one end zone, which shortens the field for

younger players and allows more playing time. It also maximizes the amount of engagement for participants by fitting two games on a single field.



### Team

Traditionally, American football consists of 22 players on the field at one time, 11 players on offense and 11 on defense. Both teams will also have players on the bench as a lot of players are designated to

play just one or the other, but it is not uncommon for players to play on both sides of the ball.

There are other football game types that involve fewer players and focus on a non-contact or

limited-contact approach to the game such as flag football, which has six players on the field at once for each team. See "Ways to Play" for more information.



### Score

#### Touchdown

This is the most common way to score points and occurs if a player carries the ball into the opponent's end zone and is worth six points. Both offensive and defensive players can score touchdowns.

#### Extra Point

After scoring a touchdown, teams can go for an extra point, which is worth one point. This almost always consists of a run or pass from the 3-yard line in youth leagues, and some non-contact leagues. This play becomes a field goal attempt when players get older.

#### 2-point Attempt

After scoring a touchdown, teams can also go for a 2-point conversion instead of an extra point. This play is often a field goal attempt in youth leagues, but turns into a play that's run from further out as players get older.

#### Safety

A safety occurs when the defense tackles or downs the offense in their own end zone. The defending team is then awarded two points and they get the ball to start the next set of downs.

#### Field Goal

Field goals aren't too common in youth leagues as it takes players time to develop the leg strength necessary to kick them. Field goals are worth three points, and occur when the offensive team kicks the ball through the goalposts and above the crossbar.



## Time

American football is typically played out over four quarters with an extended halftime break between the second and third quarters, as well as short breaks between the first and second

quarter, and the third and fourth quarter. The length of the quarters usually runs between eight minutes for younger ages up to 12 minutes for high school athletes.

Some forms of the game, however, have opted to shorten the game into halves. Flag football consists of two halves that range from 10 minutes to 25 minutes depending on the age of the participants.



## Ball Size

Footballs vary in size based on the age of the player. They start as a pee wee football and work up to high school footballs for youth participants. However, there are also sizes for college and professional football players as well.

### Pee Wee

This football is targeted for players that are nine and younger. It weighs 10 ounces, has a long circumference of 24 inches, and a short circumference of 17.5 inches.

### Junior

This football is for players from age nine up to 12. It weighs 11 ounces, has a long circumference of 25 inches, and a short circumference of 18.5 inches.

### Youth

The target age for these balls is 12-14 years old. It weighs in at 12.5 ounces, has a long circumference of 26.25 inches, and a short circumference of 19.25 inches.

### High School

This football is for all players in high school, or 14 years and older. It weighs 14-15 ounces, has a long circumference of 27.75-28.5 inches, and a short circumference of 20.75-21.125 inches.





## FOOTBALL'S BASIC RULES



### Starting the Game

Football games almost always begin with a coin toss to determine who will get the first possession. In non-contact leagues, and youth leagues attempting to minimize contact, the team that won the coin toss will get the ball in their part of the field. As participants get older, kickoffs eventually get worked into the game. When that happens, the kicking team will line up around their 40-yard line and kick the ball to the opposing team. The receiving team then starts where the ball went out of bounds or where the returner was downed.



### Out of Bounds

Football fields are marked with boundaries along all four sides of the field. If a player has possession of the ball and runs out of bounds their team starts their next possession where they went out at. However, if a player steps out of bounds before having full possession of the ball, particularly on a pass play, then it is counted as incomplete and their team takes their next possession from the previous spot.



### Moving the Ball

There are two primary ways to move the ball in the game of football. The first is running the ball, where the quarterback either keeps the ball or gives the ball to either a running back or wide receiver, and they run up the field as far as they can. The other option is passing the ball down the field, where the quarterback throws the ball to a tight end, running back, or wide receiver and, after catching the ball, they run up the field as far as they can. The play stops when the offensive player is tackled, or has their flags or TackleBars pulled off.



### Fouls

Fouls, otherwise known as penalties, are usually handed out in yardage. The ball will be moved down the field either five, 10, or 15 yards at a time, hurting the team that made the foul and benefiting the other team. There are some instances where yardage increments can be more or less than the previously specified amounts depending on the infraction and location of the ball on the field, and, on rare occasions, players can be removed from the game.

If there is a foul on the defense that moves the ball past the first down marker then the offense will get a new set of downs automatically.



**THE FIRST RECOGNIZED FOOTBALL GAME WAS PLAYED BETWEEN RUTGERS AND PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ON NOVEMBER 6, 1869. RUTGERS BEAT PRINCETON 6 - 4.**



## DRESSED TO PLAY

The game of football usually requires a lot of equipment meant to help keep the players safe. Though, there are some leagues, such as flag football, where the equipment is very limited due to the lack of contact.



### Helmet

Made up of a face mask, hard outer shell, and foam pads lined throughout the inside. It's meant to absorb shock and reduce the force of impacts to the head.



### Mouthguard

A guard formed to the wearer's mouth that helps limit injuries.



### Shoulder Pads

A key piece of equipment made with a hard outer plastic shell and shock absorbing foam insides.



### Football Pants

Specialized pants that usually go down to a player's shins. It has buttons and pockets located throughout them to help store other pads.



### Hip & Tailbone Pads

Attached to the pants and made to help protect the player's hips and tailbone.



### Thigh & Knee Pads

Pads that are made of plastic and foam which are slid into pockets inside the football pants.



### Cleats

Shoes with specialized non-metal spikes that help players get grip on grass fields. These are worn by most players, regardless of the type of football they are playing.



### Gloves

Hand gloves are not mandatory, but a lot of players wear them as a way to help grip the ball. These are worn by most players, regardless of the type of football they are playing.



### Flags

These are specialized to flag football. Players wear flags around their waist and if one gets pulled off the player is marked down.



### TackleBar Harness

These are specialized to TackleBar football. It's a harness that straps around a player's waist which has two bars on the back. Players must wrap up their opponent to remove their bars, which will mark the player down.

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## GETTING INTO POSITION

Football has a lot of different positions one can play with 11 offensive and defensive players on the field at one time. It's important to note though, that not all types of football have all these positions available.

### Offense

#### Offensive Line

This position consists of tackles, guards, and a center. They are usually the largest offensive players and have the responsibility of protecting the quarterback and blocking defenders for the running back.

#### Quarterback

This player is often considered the captain of the offense. They handle the ball on almost every play and are responsible for handing the ball off to the running back, or passing the ball to one of their teammates. In older ages, the quarterback is responsible for relaying plays from the coach to their teammates and sometimes calls plays on their own.

#### Running Back

The running back lines up in the backfield behind, or next to, the quarterback. Their primary responsibility is to take handoffs and then run as far up field as they can before getting tackled. They may also be responsible for catching passes and blocking defenders.

#### Wide Receiver

These players are usually tall, fast, and specialize in catching the ball. They line up between the end of the offensive line and sideline, and are usually the primary targets of the quarterback's passes. They are occasionally asked to run the ball or block defenders

#### Tight End

This position is a hybrid of an offensive lineman and a wide receiver. They will line up on the end of the offensive line and either block with the line, or go out for a pass on any given play.



### Defense

#### Defensive Line

The defensive line usually consists of the biggest players on the defense and counterparts the offensive line. They consist of tackles and ends, and their primary responsibilities are stopping the running backs and trying to disrupt and sack the quarterback during passing plays.

#### Linebackers

These players line up behind the defensive line and are often the jack-of-all-trades on the defense. Depending on the play they can be responsible for rushing the quarterback, stopping the run, or covering a receiver.

#### Defensive Backs

These players consist of safeties and cornerbacks and either line up behind the linebackers or outside the defensive line near the sidelines. Their primary responsibility is covering wide receivers, but are also considered the last line of defense on every play.

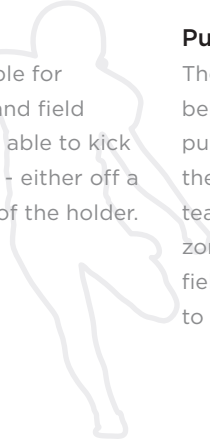




## Special Teams

### Kicker

This player is responsible for kickoffs, extra points, and field goals. They need to be able to kick the ball off the ground - either off a tee or from the hands of the holder.



### Punter

The punter usually lines up 15 yards behind the line of scrimmage. The punter is responsible for flipping the ball, or setting up the opposing team's offense deep in their own zone by kicking the ball down the field after their offense wasn't able to convert a first down.

*\*Punters and kickers are usually not prevalent in the game of football until players reach the senior level, which is around the 12-14 year age mark.*





## FOOTBALL TERMS EXPLAINED

**APPROACH** The steps a diver takes toward the end of the board at the start of their dive, which usually involves three or more steps.

**BACKFIELD** The area behind the offensive line where the quarterback and running back lineup.

**DOWN** A period of action that starts when the ball is put into play and ends when the ball is ruled dead (meaning play has come to an end).

**DRIVE** The series of plays when the offense has the ball. It usually ends with a score or the defense gaining possession of the ball via a turnover or punt.

**END ZONE** A 10-yard area at each end of the field. If a player enters the end zone with control of the ball they score a touchdown, and are awarded six points.

**EXTRA POINT** A kick, worth one point, that's kicked after a touchdown is scored. The ball must go through the uprights and above the crossbar of the goal post to be considered good.

**FAIR CATCH** When the player receiving a punt waves their hand above their head. The player indicating the fair catch is not allowed to run after catching the ball and the defenders are not allowed to touch them.

**FIELD GOAL** A kick, worth three points, that can be attempted from anywhere on the field, but teams usually try to be within 40 yards of the goal post. The ball must travel between the uprights and above the crossbar to be considered good.

**FUMBLE** When the player with the ball loses possession while running or being tackled. Anyone can recover a fumble, and if the defense recovers the ball it's called a turnover and their offense takes over.

**GOAL LINE** The line separating the end zone from the rest of the field. The football only needs to break this line for it to be a touchdown.

**GOALPOST** Located on each end of the field, large poles standing vertical in the air that make up three sides of a rectangle. It consists of two uprights on both sides, and a crossbar on the bottom.

**GRIDIRON** Another name for the playing field.

**HANDOFF** When a player, usually the quarterback, gives the ball to one of their teammates.

**HASH MARKS** The lines that run down the middle of the field, each one signifying a distance of one yard to the next. The football is always spotted on, or between, the hash marks to start each play.

**HUDDLE** When the 11 players on a given team come together to discuss strategy between plays.

**INCOMPLETION** A forward pass that falls to the ground because no receiver could catch it.

**INTERCEPTION** A pass that was caught by a player on the defense. This play results in a turnover.

**KICKOFF** A kick that the receiving team cannot try to block. This kick puts the ball into play to start the game, or start the second half, and also after a score.

**LINE OF SCRIMMAGE** An invisible line that extends from where the ball is placed on the field to both sidelines. Neither the offense or defense can cross that line until the ball is snapped and the play begins.

**PIGSKIN** Another name for the ball being played with.

**PUNT** A kick made when a player drops a ball and kicks it while the ball is falling towards their foot. A punt is usually made on a fourth down when the offense must surrender possession of the ball to the defense because it couldn't advance 10 yards.

**RED ZONE** The area from the 20-yard line to the opponent's goal line.



## FOOTBALL TERMS EXPLAINED

**RUSHING** To advance the ball by running, not passing.

**SACK** When a defensive player tackles the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage for a loss of yardage.

**SAFETY** A score, worth two points, that occurs when a defender tackles the player with the ball in their own end zone. The defending team also gains possession after this play via a punt.

**SNAP** The action of the ball being hiked (snapped between the legs) to a player on their team, which is usually the quarterback. The play officially begins when the ball is snapped.

**SPECIAL TEAMS** The 22 players who are on the field during kicks and punts. These units have specific players that will return punts and kicks, as well as players who specialize in covering punts and kicks.

**TOUCHDOWN** A score, worth six points, that occurs when a player in possession of the ball crosses the plan of the opponent's goal line.





## WAYS TO PLAY

With a little research, you should be able to find a diving program that fits your child’s interest level. There are several types of programs, each with varying structures and commitment levels.

### WAYS TO PLAY

## Flag Football



This is a non-contact, fun and fast-paced game type. Instead of tackling an opponent, you pull the flag attached to a person’s belt to stop play. This form of play is usually one of the first types of football kids will play.

<b>Age:</b> 5-17	<b>Season Length:</b> Seasons usually last from six to 12 weeks, and typically take place in the spring, summer or fall depending on where you live. In many states, there are multiple flag seasons throughout the year.	<b>Travel:</b> Some travel may be required.
<b>Training:</b> No offseason training is required, but it can help if players want to transition into a more competitive league.		
<b>Commitment:</b> Teams should expect to meet once or twice a week for practices and also weekend competitions.	<b>Structure:</b> There are usually no tryouts required and teams are divided as equally as possible. There is a high priority put on learning the fundamentals of the game instead of the competition.	



IN 1883, POINTS WERE INTRODUCED TO FOOTBALL, AND A TOUCHDOWN COUNTED AS FOUR POINTS AND FINALLY IN 1912 IT WAS INCREASED TO 6 POINTS



**WAYS TO PLAY**

## TackleBar



This is a limited contact game type that bridges the gap between flag and contact that helps athletes build fundamental football skills in a progressive way. Players wear helmets and pads, but must wrap up an opponent and rip off bars on their back to tackle them instead of bringing them to the ground.

<p><b>Age:</b> 8-12 (ages can vary based on athletes physical, mental or social maturity)</p>	<p><b>Season Length:</b> Seasons usually take place in the summer or fall seasons and last around eight weeks.</p>	<p><b>Travel:</b> Some travel may be required.</p>
<p><b>Training:</b> No offseason training is required, but it can help if players want to transition into a more competitive league.</p>		
<p><b>Commitment:</b> Once the season starts, most programs will meet once or twice a week for practice and have a game on the weekend.</p>	<p><b>Structure:</b> No tryouts are required and teams are divided as equally as possible. There is a high priority put on learning the fundamentals of the game instead of the competition.</p>	



ACCORDING TO A POLL DONE IN 2016, 33% OF AMERICAN ADULTS SAID FOOTBALL WAS THEIR FAVORITE SPORT, MORE THAN DOUBLE THE NEXT SPORT ON THE LIST.



**WAYS TO PLAY**

## Padded Flag



This is a limited contact football game that bridges the gap between flag and contact football, where athletes are taught fundamental football skills in much smaller portions. Players wear helmets and pads, but pull the flag attached to a person’s belt to stop the play instead of bringing them to the ground.

<p><b>Age:</b> 8-12 (ages can vary based on athletes physical, mental or social maturity)</p>	<p><b>Season Length:</b> Seasons usually take place in the summer or fall seasons and last around eight weeks.</p>	<p><b>Travel:</b> Some travel may be required.</p>
<p><b>Training:</b> No offseason training is required, but it can help if players want to transition into a more competitive league.</p>		
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**WILLIAM “PUDGE” HEFFELFINGER WAS THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYER. HE WAS PAID \$500 TO PLAY IN A GAME.**



**WAYS TO PLAY**

# Tackle



This is a full-contact version of the game where players begin tackling their opponents to the ground. Coaches continue to focus on teaching the fundamentals of the sport, making sure the players are staying safe while playing the game.

<p><b>Age:</b> 10+ (ages can vary based on athletes physical, mental or social maturity)</p>	<p><b>Season Length:</b> Seasons usually take place in the summer or fall seasons and last around eight weeks.</p>	<p><b>Travel:</b> Some travel may be required, but is usually minimal.</p>
<p><b>Training:</b> No offseason training is required, but it can help if players want to transition into a more competitive league.</p>		
<p><b>Commitment:</b> Once the season starts, most programs will meet once or twice a week for practice and have a game on the weekend.</p>	<p><b>Structure:</b> There is a continued focus on learning the fundamentals to keep the players as safe as possible. Leagues usually become more competitive as players get older.</p>	

*Rookie Tackle® is played on a smaller field with fewer players with specific rule changes to introduce contact in a fun and developmentally appropriate way.*



**THE SCIENTIFIC TERM FOR THE SHAPE OF A FOOTBALL IS A “PROLATE SPHEROID,” BUT TODAY MOST PEOPLE KNOW WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT WHEN YOU SAY “FOOTBALL-SHAPED.”**



**WAYS TO PLAY**

**School**

Preparing for college and participating as a member of your school against other schools in your area.

<p><b>Age:</b> 15-18</p>	<p><b>Season Length:</b> High School seasons usually run from August through November, but exact seasons depend on your state.</p>	<p><b>Travel:</b> Travel to nearby cities is usually required.</p>
<p><b>Training:</b> Offseason and in-season training is required, but is often conducted through the school. It also helps to train prior to trying out for the team for the first time..</p>		
<p><b>Commitment:</b> Practices will usually occur after every school day during the season with one game a week being played. Games are typically held on Friday nights.</p>	<p><b>Structure:</b> Teams compete against other high schools. Coaches are paid and student players are generally skilled, depending on the division and school district.</p>	



**PRESIDENT HERBERT HOOVER WAS A STUDENT MANAGER FOR THE STANFORD FOOTBALL TEAM WHEN HE ATTENDED COLLEGE IN THE EARLY 1890'S. ACCORDING TO TEAM LORE, THE 1892 STANFORD VS. CALIFORNIA GAME WAS DELAYED BECAUSE HOOVER FORGOT TO BRING THE BALL.**



## WORDS OF ADVICE

### **Let them play**

Remember it's a game before it's a sport. That means it's supposed to be fun! Kids enjoy running around, making friends, playing and learning new skills. Parents should be excited for the same reasons!

### **Every position is different**

In other sports the responsibilities and skills needed on the field of play might be pretty similar. That's not the case in football! Quarterbacks, linemen, defensive backs all have important jobs and they're all very different from each other.

### **Youth football is not the same as the NCAA or NFL**

It looks a lot different, don't come out to the youth field expecting to see what you see on Saturdays and Sundays. Enjoy the experience!

### **It's all football**

Recently, more game types have been created to meet athletes where they are on their developmental journeys. Whether your child is playing non-contact, limited contact or contact - it's all football. The skills, techniques and lessons they'll learn in any game type translate to all forms of football.

### **Ask your coach questions**

Football drills can look a little funny at times. With such different positions (see above) drills can vary from group to group. If you don't get why your child is doing something or what the point of a drill is, just ask your coach! They'll be happy to answer you.

### **Focus on the fundamentals**

Prioritizing winning too early can turn kids off from the game. Instead, celebrate small victories like being in the right position, making the right decisions or improving throughout the season.

### **Make friends with a seasoned parent**

All football parents started as new football parents. Many with the same questions as you! Find a parent or two that's been around for a couple seasons. They can help teach you the game and how to be the best football mom or dad you can be.

### **Play at home**

Throw the ball around, work on some skills in the backyard. Ask your coach what activities you can do at home in between games or practice. Playing with your kid is a great bonding experience and can help you learn the game more.



**THE TOUCHDOWN GOT ITS NAME BECAUSE THE ORIGINAL RULE STATED THAT THE BALL MUST BE 'TOUCHED' TO THE GROUND FOR IT TO BE COUNTED.**



## FOOTBALL HIERARCHY

Youth football is made up of a variety of leagues, divisions and affiliated groups. Here is an overview of each level and how it relates to the others.

### IFAF

Formed in 1998, the International Federation of American Football is the international governing body for the sport of American football. With 67 members worldwide, IFAF is responsible for all regulatory, competition, and development aspects of the game globally.

### IFAF Members

Organized into continental associations (Africa, Asia, Americas, Europe, and Oceania) based on geography, IFAF members oversee the football activities within their respective countries and sponsor national teams to compete in official world and continental IFAF competitions.

### USA Football

The sole IFAF member for the United States, USA Football has won the gold medal at the most recent world championship in four out of five of IFAF's championship disciplines (Men's Tackle, Women's Tackle, Men's Flag, and Women's Flag). USA Football also earned the bronze medal at the most recent IFAF U19 World Championship in 2018.

### Leagues

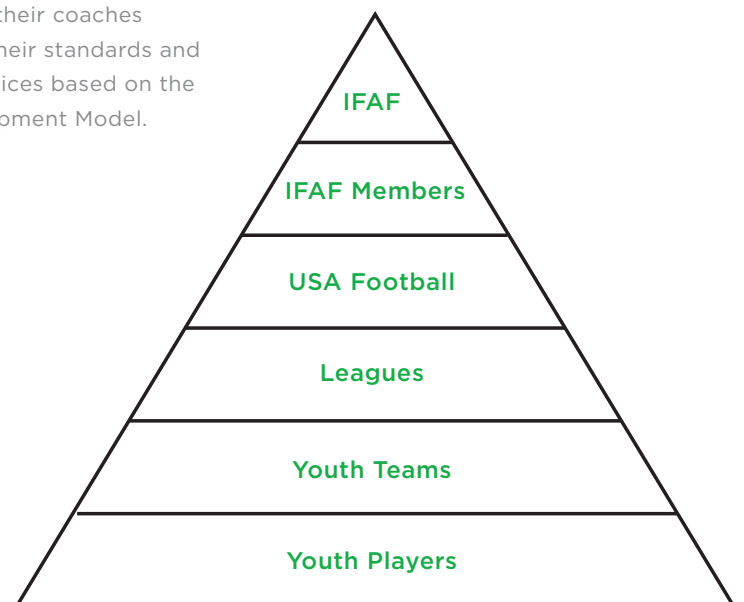
USA Football offers resources to youth football leagues across the country in support of a variety of disciplines including flag football, TackleBar®, Padded Flag, Rookie Tackle® and 11-player tackle football. Leagues work with USA Football to get their coaches certified, raise their standards and share best practices based on the Football Development Model.

### Youth Teams

Since 2012, USA Football has certified more than 700,000 coaches on the topics of tackling, blocking, equipment fitting, concussion recognition and response, heat and hydration, and sudden cardiac arrest in an effort to provide athletes a better and safer experience.

### Youth Players

Currently within the United States, around four million youth players play the sport of football. There are approximately 2.3 million tackle players and 1.6 million flag players.





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#### ABOUT USA FOOTBALL

From the field to the stands, USA Football believes in the power of the game. As new players grow their love of football, we'll grow the sport alongside them. Through the advancement of coaches, we develop valuable leadership, mentoring and practical skills, positioning them as forces of change both on and off the field.

We establish unmatched standards of safety, education and support for coaches and players in order to provide an environment where bonds are formed, skills are perfected and leaders are born.

[www.usafootball.com](http://www.usafootball.com)

*Photos provided by USA Football.*