

New season, new laws by Stuart Fuller

It used to be the exception rather than the rule that we would see changes to the laws of the game at the start of the season, but it seems that the group of individuals who set and review the laws of the game every year, The International Football Association Board or IFAB for short, have been busier than normal in their ideas this summer, meaning there's a few new changes that we all need to be aware of before we start making a fool of ourselves trying to call out the officials for making mistakes during the game.

Some of the new changes won't be relevant to us down here in the Non-Leagues, such as the changes to Law 5 regarding VAR reviews, or the fact that we can't refer to those mid-half breaks as "drinks", instead now known as "cooling" as per the amendment to Law 7, but others will certainly have an impact on football at every level.

Below is a brief summary of the relevant rule changes and how they may impact the football we see this season.

Law 3 – A player who is being substituted MUST leave the field at the nearest point on the boundary line, unless otherwise directed by the referee. In theory this should speed up substitutions but it may also lead to an assistant referee making a wrong call by assuming a substituted player on the far side of the pitch is active. From a personal point of view, it will make the job of the PA announcer even harder when the substitute board breaks down or isn't used.

Law 5 has a number of changes but the most interesting one is that team officials can now be given yellow and red cards for misconduct. If the culprit can't be identified, then the most senior member of the team (in rank rather than age) will receive the card. Another change is that if a penalty kick is awarded and the taker needs to receive treatment, he is allowed to remain on the pitch and take the kick. This could lead to some interesting time wasting tactics if the team awarded the penalty are already winning.

Law 8 sees a change to the coin toss. At the moment if a team wins the toss they choose the end they wish to attack. Now they can elect to kick-off instead, which is basically a revision of the rule back to what it was originally. Law 8 also partly covers the changes to the dropped ball rules. There are now no contested drop-balls and if an incident occurs where it is necessary to restart the game with a drop-ball, the team that last touched the ball will be given the uncontested ball and every other player (of both teams) has to be at least four metres away.

Law 9 covers the other part of the dropped-ball situation. If the ball hits any match official and goes into the goal, causes possession to change or starts an attacking move for the opposing team, the team that last touched the ball will be given an uncontested drop ball (this happened in the Pre-Season game last Saturday against Whitehawk as James Hammond tried to play a ball forward and it hit the referee). Again, some clever players may look to deliberately play a ball off an official to get out of a pressurised situation and get a drop ball.

One of the most talked about changes comes under Law 12 where the rules for Handball have been re-written for “greater clarity/consistency” which we all know is going to result in the opposite effect. Essentially, if the ball strikes an arm or hand which is away from the body, expect to be penalised. End of. No mitigation for “ball to hand”, trying to move the arm out of the way or not being able to get out of the way quick enough.

One strange rule in Law 12 that I am still trying to work out is that an ‘illegal’ (and that word is written exactly like that in the official law change sheet from IFAB) handball offence by the goalkeeper in their own penalty area is not sanctioned with a yellow or red card. I have no idea in what circumstance this works, apart from handling a backpass unless I’ve missed the introduction of “rush” goalkeepers as per playground rule 34.B.

Another one in Law 12 that could be open to abuse. If, after a throw-in or deliberate pass from a team-mate, the goalkeeper unsuccessfully kicks or tries to kick the ball to release it into play, the goalkeeper can then handle the ball. A savvy keeper could easily pretend to kick and miss to then be able to pick the ball up. The referee then has to interpret whether his attempt at a kick was deliberate and if not, award an indirect free-kick and caution the goalkeeper.

The use of the defensive wall is covered in Law 13 with the major change being that when there is a defensive ‘wall’ of at least three players, all attacking team players must be at least 1 metre from the ‘wall’. This stops those situations where attackers are able to muscle their way into the wall, creating a gap for the kick taker to take advantage.

Penalty kick changes come under Law 14. The goalkeeper isn’t allowed to be touching the frame of the goal and must have at least part of one foot on, or in line with, the goal line when a penalty kick is taken; they also cannot stand behind the line

And finally. One big change that we saw in operation last Saturday is covered in Law 16. At goal kicks, the ball is in play once it is kicked and clearly moves; it does not have to leave the penalty area. However, the attacking player(s) must be outside of the penalty area before they can re-enter the area to challenge for the ball.

What could possibly go wrong?