



THE GAUNTLET

OFFICIAL 5v5 FLAG FOOTBALL RULEBOOK

2026-27 TOURNAMENT SERIES

UNLEASHED FLAG FOUNDATION

Game structure based on the USA Flag™ 5's 2026.2 framework, with Gauntlet-specific field dimensions, tournament timing, and special-play modifications.

Effective for all Gauntlet Series events unless an event bulletin expressly states otherwise.

MORE THAN A GAME.

RULEBOOK AUTHORITY & SERIES STANDARD

This rulebook establishes the official playing rules for The Gauntlet 2026-27 tournament series. It uses the structure and core 5v5 concepts of the USA Flag™ 5's Rulebook v2026.2 while stating the Gauntlet rules in original language and incorporating tournament-specific modifications.

GAUNTLET RULES CONTROL: Where this rulebook differs from the USA Football source framework, the Gauntlet rule written here governs Gauntlet competition.

Divisions. Select Boys: 6U, 8U, 10U, 12U. Girls Championship: 8U, 10U, 12U, 14U, 16U, High School.

Age cutoff. August 1, 2026. High School athletes must be academically enrolled for the 2026-27 school year.

Roster cap. Maximum 12 players per roster. Five players compete on the field at a time; a team may continue with four after an injury if necessary, but not fewer than four.

Interpretation. The Referee has final authority over rules administration during the game. Tournament Administration retains final authority over eligibility, event operations, suspensions, and matters not expressly covered.

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RULE 1: GAME, FIELD, BALL & EQUIPMENT

SECTION 1. GENERAL PROVISIONS

Article 1. Coin Toss

Team captains meet at midfield before the game. The visiting team calls the toss. The winner chooses offense or defense; the other team chooses direction. The team that begins on defense receives the ball to begin the second half, and teams change direction at halftime.

Article 2. Possession and Change of Possession

An offensive possession begins at its own 5-yard line. The offense has four downs to cross midfield. After legally crossing midfield, it receives a new four-down series to score. If the offense fails to cross midfield or fails to score after crossing, the opponent begins its next normal possession at its own 5-yard line. Interceptions are live and returnable; the resulting possession begins where the return ends.

Article 3. Coaches

For Gauntlet youth competition, one coach may be permitted on the field when Tournament Administration designates the division as coach-on-field. Once the quarterback begins the cadence, an on-field coach must stop instructing and remain clear of the action. No on-field coaching is permitted in divisions designated as junior/high-school level unless expressly authorized by the event.

SECTION 2. ROSTERS

Article 1. Team Rosters

A Gauntlet roster may contain no more than 12 athletes. A team must begin with five players. If injury leaves a team without a substitute, it may continue with four players, but never fewer than four.

Article 2. Uniform Colors

Opponents must wear sufficiently contrasting jerseys. When a conflict exists, the visiting team must change unless the Referee approves the contrast.

Article 3. On-Field Participants

Only eligible rostered players may participate. Tournament eligibility and roster-verification requirements apply in addition to these playing rules.

SECTION 3. POSITIONS

Article 1. Offense

The five offensive players are a center, quarterback, and three receivers/backs. The center is eligible after completing the snap. The quarterback is the player who first possesses the snap and may not directly run across the line of scrimmage unless the ball has first been legally transferred and returned. Other offensive players are eligible receivers/backs.

Article 2. Defense

A declared blitzer must align at least 7 yards from the line of scrimmage and signal by raising a hand before the snap. A properly declared blitzer who rushes immediately and directly receives right-of-way protection. After a legal handoff, any defender may cross the line of scrimmage as a rusher.

SECTION 4. EQUIPMENT

- Players must use legal two-flag pop-socket belts.
- Rubber-soled athletic shoes are required; exposed metal cleats are prohibited.
- Gloves and soft protective equipment are permitted. Exposed metal braces and unsafe jewelry are prohibited.
- Jerseys must not cover or obstruct flags. Pants/shorts may not have exposed pockets, belt loops, snaps, clips, or zippers that create a hazard or interfere with flag pulling.
- Mouthguards are required for every player on the field.

SECTION 5. THE BALL

A legal football appropriate for the age/division must be used. Teams may use a larger ball than the minimum appropriate size but may not gain an advantage by using an undersized ball. The Referee has final authority over ball legality.

SECTION 6. FLAG SPECIFICATIONS

Each player wears two matching flags on a tightly secured belt, positioned near the hips and hanging freely. Flags must visibly contrast with the player's shorts/pants and may not be covered, greased, glued, shortened, modified, or otherwise manipulated. Intentional flag manipulation may result in disqualification.

SECTION 7. THE FIELD

GAUNTLET FIELD: 25 yards wide x 64 yards long overall | 7-yard end zones | 50-yard field of play

Article 1. Field Dimensions

The Gauntlet field is 25 yards wide and 64 yards long from back line to back line. Each end zone is 7 yards deep, leaving exactly 50 yards of live field between the goal lines. Midfield is the 25-yard line of the field of play.

Article 2. No-Run Zones

Five-yard no-run zones are enforced immediately before each goal line and on both sides of midfield. A team whose line of scrimmage is inside a no-run zone must advance the ball by a legal forward pass beyond the line of scrimmage; a handoff does not remove the pass requirement.

RULE 2: TOURNAMENT PLAY & TIMING

THE GAUNTLET IS TOURNAMENT PLAY ONLY. League-play timing recommendations do not apply.

SECTION 1. GAME CLOCK

Article 1. Regulation Length

Every Gauntlet game consists of two 12-minute halves with a 2-minute halftime. This applies to every age division.

Article 2. Pool Play Clock

Pool-play games use a running clock in both halves. There is no Pro Clock in pool play. The clock may stop for charged timeouts, injuries, official administration, or when the Referee determines a stoppage is necessary.

Article 3. Bracket Play Clock

Bracket games use a running clock except for the conditional Pro Clock described below. A Pro Clock is activated only with 2:00 remaining in the second half when the score differential is 12 points or fewer.

Article 4. Two-Minute Warning

A two-minute warning is announced in both halves of every game. The first-half two-minute warning is informational only and does not stop the game clock. In the second half, the two-minute warning stops the clock only in bracket play when the score is within 12 points and the Pro Clock is therefore activated. When stopped for this activation, the clock resumes on the snap of the next play.

Article 5. Pro Clock Operation

When the Gauntlet Pro Clock is active, the clock stops for: awarding a first down or a change of possession; penalty administration; a runner or ball going out of bounds; an incomplete forward or backward pass; a score and the ensuing try/onside attempt; and a charged timeout. The clock restarts according to the result of the preceding play and the Referee's ready/snap signal.

Article 6. Play Clock

Once the ball is ready for play, the offense has 30 seconds to snap. When no visible play clock is available, officials may issue one warning before enforcing delay of game.

Article 7. Timeouts

Each team receives two 30-second charged timeouts per half. Unused timeouts do not carry over. There are no charged timeouts in overtime.

Article 8. Injury Stoppage

The clock stops for an injury and restarts when the injured player has been removed or cleared and both teams are ready, subject to Pro Clock restart rules when active.

SECTION 2. TOURNAMENT OVERTIME

Article 1. Possession Order

A coin toss determines the choice of offense or defense first. The official selects the end of the field. In later overtime rounds, first-choice alternates between teams.

Article 2. Overtime Attempts

Each team receives one play per overtime round: a 1-point attempt from the 5-yard line or a 2-point attempt from the 10-yard line. Each team receives an opportunity in the round unless a defensive score ends the contest under the applicable scoring rule. If still tied, another round is played. Regulation rules and penalties remain in effect. No timeouts are permitted.

RULE 3: LIVE BALL / DEAD BALL

SECTION 1. LIVE BALL

Article 1. Live Ball

The ball becomes live on a legal snap and remains live until an official declares it dead.

Article 2. Ball Spot and Neutral Zone

Before each play, an official establishes the ball spot, line of scrimmage, and neutral zone. Entering the neutral zone before the snap is a dead-ball infraction. Officials may provide a courtesy alignment instruction before enforcing the snap.

Article 3. Pre-Snap Defense

The defense may not imitate the offense's cadence or signals in an attempt to cause confusion or a false start.

Article 4. Possession Inbounds

A player establishes possession inbounds when at least one foot or another body part lands inbounds while controlling the ball. A boundary line is out of bounds.

SECTION 2. DEAD BALL

Article 1. When the Ball Becomes Dead

The play ends when the ball hits the ground; the ball-carrier's flag is pulled or falls off; the runner steps out of bounds; a touchdown, try, or safety is scored; any body part other than a hand or foot touches the ground; a receiver gains possession while missing a flag; or an official blows the play dead.

Article 2. Bad Snap

A bad snap that contacts the ground is dead at that spot.

Article 3. Inadvertent Whistle

The offended team may accept the ball at the location/time of the inadvertent whistle with the down consumed, or replay the down from the previous line of scrimmage.

Article 4. Substitutions

Substitutions are permitted during dead-ball periods. No substitution may occur after the ball becomes live.

Article 5. Rule-Interpretation Challenge

A head coach may use a timeout to question application of a rule. If the ruling is corrected, the timeout is restored; if the ruling stands, the timeout is charged. Each team is limited to one coach challenge per half. Judgment calls are not reviewable.

RULE 4: GAME PLAY

SECTION 1. SCORING

Article 1. Touchdown

A touchdown is worth 6 points.

Article 2. Point After Touchdown

A team may attempt 1 point from the 5-yard line or 2 points from the 10-yard line. The 5-yard try is inside the goal-line no-run zone and therefore must be a pass. A 10-yard try may be run or pass unless a penalty places the ball inside a no-run zone. A defensive touchdown on a try is worth 2 points. The offense must declare its try value before the snap; changing the declaration requires a charged timeout when available.

Article 3. Safety

A safety is worth 2 points. A safety may occur when the ball-carrier is declared down in the offense's own end zone, a live-ball result places the offense down there, or an accepted foul in the end zone produces a safety by rule.

Article 4. Mercy Rule

A game ends immediately when a team establishes a lead of 30 points or more. No PAT is attempted after the score that creates the 30-point margin. A forfeit is recorded as 30-0.

SECTION 2. RUNNING

Article 1. Ball Spot

Forward progress is determined by the position of the football when the flag is pulled, not the runner's hips or feet.

Article 2. Legal Runs and Transfers

Direct handoffs and backward passes may occur behind the line of scrimmage. Multiple legal transfers are permitted. The quarterback may not directly run across the line of scrimmage after receiving the snap. A player receiving a legal handoff may pass from behind the line of scrimmage. A center sneak by direct handoff is prohibited.

Article 3. Gauntlet No-Run Zones

No-run zones are the five yards immediately before each goal line and the five-yard areas on both sides of midfield. When the line of scrimmage is inside one of these zones, the ball must be advanced by a legal forward pass beyond the line of scrimmage.

Article 4. Flag Guarding

A runner may not stiff-arm, lower an arm/head/shoulder, use the ball or clothing to obstruct a flag, or intentionally cover the flags. Diving, leaping, or jumping to avoid a flag pull is prohibited. Spinning is legal if the runner remains under control and does not leave the feet to evade a pull. A runner may leave the feet to avoid a collision when clearly necessary for safety.

Article 5. Blocking / Screening

Blocking and moving screens are prohibited. Offensive players without the ball may not create a path by obstructing defenders.

Article 6. Running With the Ball-Carrier

Once the ball crosses the line of scrimmage, offensive teammates without the ball must stop accompanying the runner in a way that creates interference or screening.

SECTION 3. PASSING

Article 1. Forward Pass

A forward pass is one whose first contact is beyond the release point. A forward pass must be released with the passer fully behind the line of scrimmage. A passer may legally throw the ball away only when the pass crosses the line of scrimmage and is in the vicinity of an eligible receiver. When a Pro Clock is active with 2:00 or less, a legal spike directly to the ground near the quarterback is permitted and consumes a down.

Article 2. Shovel Pass

A shovel pass is permitted but must be received beyond the line of scrimmage to qualify as the required forward pass.

Article 3. Seven-Second Pass Clock

A seven-second pass clock begins at the snap and ends when the quarterback legally hands off or releases a pass. If time expires with the quarterback still possessing the ball, the play is dead, the down is consumed, and the ball returns to the previous line of scrimmage.

SECTION 4. RECEIVING

- All five offensive players are eligible receivers, subject to snap/transfer restrictions.
- A legal catch requires control and at least one foot or another body part inbounds.
- Simultaneous possession by an offensive and defensive player is awarded to the offense.
- Interceptions are live and returnable.

SECTION 5. BLITZER AND RUSHER

Article 1. Blitz

A maximum of two defenders may declare as blitzers on a play. Each must be at least 7 yards from the line of scrimmage at the snap and clearly signal by raising a hand. A legal declared blitz must rush immediately and directly to retain right-of-way protection.

Article 2. Rusher

After a legal handoff, the 7-yard restriction ends and any defender may cross the line of scrimmage.

Article 3. Illegal Rush / Signal

A defender who crosses illegally before a handoff/pass, declares from inside 7 yards, or creates an invalid/multiple signal beyond the permitted two blitzers is subject to the applicable penalty.

Article 4. Roughing the Passer

A defender may attempt to pull the passer's flag or block a pass but may not make illegal contact with the passer.

Article 5. Impeding the Blitz

A moving offensive player may not obstruct the direct path of a legal blitz. A stationary player with established position is not required to vacate that position, and the blitz must avoid contact.

Article 6. Quarterback Sack

A sack occurs when the quarterback's flag is pulled behind the line of scrimmage. The ball is spotted where the quarterback's feet are at the pull. A sack in the offense's end zone is a safety.

SECTION 6. HOLDING, SHIELDING, CONTACT & AIMING

- Holding: grasping an opponent or equipment and failing to release immediately in a way that affects play.
- Shielding: a moving player without right of way obstructs an opponent's path without legal entitlement to that space.
- Contact: impact contact beyond incidental touching may be penalized.
- Aiming: deliberately targeting or initiating avoidable/excessive contact, including attacking a ball already possessed by a runner.

SECTION 7. FLAG PULLING

- A legal flag pull occurs only against the player possessing the ball.
- A defender may dive to pull a flag but may not tackle, hold, or run through the runner.
- Stripping or attempting to pull the football from the runner is illegal.
- If a flag falls off inadvertently, the player is down immediately upon gaining possession.
- Intentionally pulling a non-ball-carrier's flag is illegal.

SECTION 8. FORMATIONS

- The offense must have at least the center on the line of scrimmage; the quarterback must be off the line.
- After a shift involving two or more players, all must become set for one full second.
- Only one player may be in motion at a time, at least 1 yard behind and parallel to the line of scrimmage. Motion toward the line is illegal.
- The center must make a rapid, continuous snap between the legs to a backfield player, and the ball must completely leave the center's hands.

SECTION 9. UNSPORTSMANLIKE CONDUCT

Article 1. Dangerous / Intentional Conduct

Intentional tackling, elbowing, cheap shots, blocking, abusive conduct, or other dangerous unsportsmanlike acts may result in immediate ejection. Players may not physically or verbally abuse opponents, coaches, or officials. Ball-carriers must make a reasonable effort to avoid defenders who have established position; defenders may not run through a runner to make a flag pull.

Article 2. Language

Offensive, threatening, or confrontational language is prohibited. Officials may warn and then eject for continued conduct; severe conduct may warrant immediate ejection.

Article 3. Spectators and Field Safety

Spectators must support a safe, youth-centered environment and may not harass officials or teams. Spectator equipment and nonparticipants must remain outside restricted team/administrative areas and clear of end lines and active fields.

RULE 5: OFFICIALS DUTIES

SECTION 1. GENERAL PROVISIONS

Article 1. Jurisdiction

Officials' jurisdiction begins with the pregame coin toss and ends when the Referee declares the score final.

Article 2. Crew Size

Gauntlet games are supervised by the officiating crew assigned by Tournament Administration. A standard crew may contain two, three, or four officials, with duties combined as necessary when fewer than four are assigned.

SECTION 2. REFEREE

Article 1. Authority and Position

The Referee works from the offensive backfield and has general oversight of the contest, final authority for the score and rules rulings, responsibility for the ready-for-play, penalty administration, player equipment, quarterback/pass-clock coverage, and notification of disqualifications.

SECTION 3. DOWN JUDGE

Article 1. Duties

The Down Judge works on the line of scrimmage, operates or supervises the down indicator, tracks downs, rules on the line of scrimmage and assigned sideline, and follows forward progress once the ball advances.

SECTION 4. FIELD JUDGE

Article 1. Duties

The Field Judge aligns approximately 7 yards deep opposite the down indicator, assists with the rush line, timing when assigned, sideline coverage, and forward progress/downfield action.

SECTION 5. SIDE JUDGE

Article 1. Duties

When assigned, the Side Judge provides deep coverage, timing support, sideline/receiver coverage, and assistance on long passes and forward progress.

RULE 6: PENALTIES

SECTION 1. GENERAL PROVISIONS

- Officials call and administer all penalties.
- Incidental contact arising from normal play is judged by the officiating crew.
- Penalties are enforced from the line of scrimmage unless designated as spot or end-of-play fouls.
- Only the head coach or designated team captain may request a rules clarification.
- A game may not end on an accepted defensive penalty.
- Live-ball fouls are administered before dead-ball fouls.
- When standard enforcement would exceed half the distance to the goal, half-the-distance enforcement applies.

SECTION 2. DEFENSIVE SPOT FOULS

Foul	Enforcement
Holding	+10 yards from spot and automatic first down
Stripping	+10 yards and automatic first down
Illegal flag pull before possession	+5 yards from spot
Illegal equipment	+5 yards from spot; repeated violations may escalate to unsportsmanlike conduct/ejection

SECTION 3. OFFENSIVE SPOT FOULS

Foul	Enforcement
Screening / blocking / holding / running with ball-carrier	-10 yards and loss of down
Charging	-10 yards and loss of down
Flag guarding	-5 yards and loss of down
Illegal equipment	-5 yards from spot; repeated violations may escalate
Intentional grounding	-5 yards and loss of down

SECTION 4. DEFENSIVE PENALTIES

Foul	Enforcement
Defensive pass interference	+10 yards from line of scrimmage and automatic first down
Defensive unnecessary roughness	+10 yards from end of play and automatic first down
Defensive unsportsmanlike / taunting	+10 yards from end of play and automatic first down
Offsides	+5 yards from line of scrimmage
Illegal rush	+5 yards from line of scrimmage
Illegal signal	+5 yards from line of scrimmage; live-ball foul
Roughing the passer	+10 yards from line of scrimmage and automatic first down; on a completed pass, offense may elect enforcement from end of play
Defensive delay of game	+5 yards from line of scrimmage

SECTION 5. OFFENSIVE PENALTIES

Foul	Enforcement
Offensive unnecessary roughness	-10 yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down
Offensive unsportsmanlike / taunting	-10 yards from end of play
False start / offensive offsides	-5 yards from line of scrimmage
Delay of game	-5 yards from line of scrimmage
Illegal forward pass	-5 yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down
Offensive pass interference	-10 yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down
Illegal motion	-5 yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down
Impeding the blitz	-5 yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down
Center sneak	-5 yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down
Illegal backward-pass action	-5 yards from line of scrimmage and loss of down

RULE 7: GAUNTLET ONSIDE ATTEMPT

ONE ONSIDE ATTEMPT PER TEAM, PER GAME.

SECTION 1. DECLARATION

Article 1. When It May Be Used

A team may use its single onside attempt after any touchdown it scores, at any point in the game, provided the team has not already used its onside attempt.

Article 2. Required Declaration

The scoring team must announce its intent to attempt an onside play after the touchdown and before declaring whether its point-after try will be for 1 or 2 points. Once declared, the onside opportunity is considered used for that game, subject only to an accepted defensive penalty that requires the onside down to be replayed.

Article 3. PAT Result Does Not Control Eligibility

The scoring team's success or failure on the 1-point or 2-point try has no effect on the previously declared onside attempt. The onside attempt is still played after the try.

SECTION 2. ONSIDE PLAY

Article 1. Starting Spot

The onside attempt begins at the attempting team's own 5-yard line.

Article 2. Line to Gain

The offense receives one play to advance the ball to or beyond midfield. Reaching midfield is the line to gain for a successful onside conversion.

Article 3. Successful Attempt

If the offense reaches or crosses midfield on the onside play, it retains possession. The ensuing offensive series begins at the dead-ball spot produced by the successful onside play, with a new series of downs to score because midfield has been crossed.

Article 4. Failed Attempt

If the offense does not reach midfield, possession transfers to the opponent at the spot where the onside play ends. Unlike an ordinary failed drive, the new offense does not automatically return to its own 5-yard line; it takes possession at the conclusion spot of the failed onside play.

SECTION 3. PENALTIES ON THE ONSIDE ATTEMPT

Article 1. Defensive Penalty

An accepted defensive penalty does not automatically make the onside attempt successful. The penalty is administered under Rule 6, and the offense is granted another onside play with the same requirement to reach midfield. The replay is not counted as a second onside attempt.

Article 2. Offensive Penalty

An offensive foul is administered under Rule 6. Unless the enforcement itself produces a replay by rule, the onside down is consumed and the attempt fails if the offense does not legally achieve the midfield line to gain after enforcement.

Article 3. Turnover

An interception or other legal defensive change of possession during the onside play is live and may be returned under normal rules. When the play ends, the defense/new offense retains possession at the resulting dead-ball spot.

APPENDIX A: GAUNTLET FIELD LAYOUT

The diagram below is schematic and not to scale. Yardages govern.



FIELD WIDTH: 25 YARDS | TOTAL LENGTH: 64 YARDS | LIVE FIELD BETWEEN GOAL LINES: 50 YARDS

No-run zones: five yards before each goal line and five yards on each side of midfield. A line of scrimmage inside any Gauntlet no-run zone requires a legal forward pass beyond the line of scrimmage.

APPENDIX B: GAME-DAY QUICK REFERENCE

Field	25 x 64 yards total; 7-yard end zones; 50-yard field of play
No-run zones	5 yards before each goal line + 5 yards on both sides of midfield
Game length	Two 12-minute halves; 2-minute halftime
Pool clock	Running clock throughout; no Pro Clock
Bracket clock	Running clock; Pro Clock only final 2:00 of second half when margin is 12 or fewer
Two-minute warning	Announced both halves; clock stops only for second-half bracket Pro Clock activation
Timeouts	Two 30-second timeouts per half
Play clock	30 seconds
Pass clock	7 seconds
Mercy	30-point lead ends game immediately
Normal possession	Own 5-yard line; 4 downs to midfield, then 4 to score
PAT	1 point from 5 (pass only); 2 points from 10
Onside	One per team/game; declare after TD before PAT choice; one play from own 5 to midfield
Roster	Maximum 12 athletes
Age cutoff	August 1, 2026

OFFICIALS + COACHES: When in doubt, apply the written Gauntlet modification first, then the corresponding core 5v5 principle.

Source framework: USA Football, USA Flag™ 5's Rulebook v2026.2. This Gauntlet rulebook is an independently written tournament rulebook and is not a republication of the USA Football rulebook.

Series authority: Unleashed Flag Foundation. Tournament Administration may issue written event bulletins for safety, facility, weather, or operational conditions. Any bulletin must identify the specific rule affected.