



Columbia Football Officials Association

Covered Up

By Joe Stephan- NFHS

Coach: "Hey, ref! What's the call?"

Official: "You had an ineligible receiver downfield, coach."

Coach: "What was his number?"

Official: "No. 86, coach."

Coach: "No. 86!? That's my tight end! How can he be ineligible?"

Official: "He was covered up, coach."

Coach: "What?"

Official: "Covered up!"

Coach: "What do you mean, covered up?"

Have you ever had this conversation with a coach? It could have taken place at any level of competition. With all the multi-set offenses used today, receivers frequently get "covered up" and when they go downfield for a pass play, they are ineligible. Explaining this to the offending team's sideline can sometimes be a challenge. We need to be able to identify this situation on the field, recognize when it is a foul and be able to communicate with the coaches.

So what does being "covered up" mean? In the situation above, the short answer is that No. 86, the tight end, became ineligible when the wide receiver on the same side, lined up outside of him on the line of scrimmage. When that occurred, No. 86 became an interior lineman, ineligible by position. The wide receiver covered up the tight end. In order for a player to be an eligible receiver, he must be eligible by both number and position. The eligible numbers are 1-49 and 80-99. The eligible positions are on the end of the line (end) or off the line (back). Interior linemen are ineligible by position and number unless the numbering exception is in play. So, in

any legal formation, there may be as many as six eligible receivers, two ends and four backs. (Rule 7, Section 5 Article 6a; and Rule 2, Section 30, Articles 3 and 9)

When we normally think of ineligible receivers, we visualize one of the interior linemen, numbered 50-79, slipping downfield during a pass play. These guys are usually very easy to pick out because those numbers and the size of the players look out of place.

On the other hand, a covered-up receiver may go unnoticed because he has an eligible number. The only way you would know he is ineligible is to have observed that he was ineligible by position at the snap. The wing officials have the best view since they are able to see who is on or off the line.



So what causes them to become covered up? A player - usually a back - lines up outside of him on the line of scrimmage. That player is now the end and our unfortunate and usually unsuspecting receiver, becomes ineligible by position. If he goes downfield during a legal pass play, it is a foul for having an ineligible player downfield. If he touches or catches the pass, it is a foul for illegal touching.

Let me describe a typical situation where this occurs. The offensive team breaks the huddle late in the 25-second count. There is apparent confusion because one of the wide receivers starts to line up on one side and

then sprints to the other to set up. The quarterback is already under center and has started his count. The confused receiver sets up on the line, forgetting that he is supposed to be off the line. The tight end is inside him in a three-point stance. Just as he gets set, the ball is snapped. He and the tight end head downfield in their pass patterns. The pass is thrown toward the tight end, but it is too high and lands incomplete. The wing official drops a flag for an ineligible receiver downfield.

I want to make a final point. Many high school teams today employ multiple formations including shifts and motion. Defenses have also become more sophisticated in order to match up with these offenses and to cover the eligible receivers. It is important to be aware of illegal formations and covered-up receivers, because they can provide an unfair advantage to the offense.

On the other hand, this is the kind of call you don't want to make unless it is clearly a foul. Don't get locked into the call. Keep in mind that a shift prior to the snap could make him eligible. Remember, you still have all of your other responsibilities!

Some preventive officiating could be helpful. As a wing official, you can talk to the wide receivers about lining up properly during the dead-ball period between plays. You can also emphasize alignment by indicating the line of scrimmage with your foot. Do not offer any suggestions while they are getting into formation. It is not your job to coach them or tell them where they should be lined up. This can cause even more confusion and result in an illegal formation or illegal motion, or both. Be aware that you may have to allow a little latitude on fields that are poorly marked or become so due to inclement weather.

Be prepared to explain this call to the referee. You should be able to tell the referee the number of the ineligible receiver and the number of the player who caused him to be covered up. If you are a wing official, you may have to communicate the information clearly to the coach on your sideline. If you are on the other sideline, you may have to relay this information second-hand. At any rate, you should have an understanding of this foul and be able to identify it on the field and communicate it to the coach.

Official: *“Coach, No. 86 was ineligible because No. 28 lined up on the line outside of him causing him to be covered up.”*

Coach: *“Okay. But you guys missed that pass interference call on us last series. That pass was uncatchable!”*

Official: *“Coach, we don't have that rule in high school.”*

Coach: *“What?”*

Official: *“That is a college and NFL rule - but not high school”*

Coach: *“You guys are killing me!”*