

## COMMENTARY

# Soccer's Rules: What's changed for the 2023-24 season

by Ian Plenderleith (/publications/author/25/ian-plenderleith/) @Plenderleithlan  
(<https://www.twitter.com/Plenderleithlan>), Jul 25, 2023



(<https://bit.ly/3O5pRoe>)

Every summer, soccer's rule changes tend to creep under the radar unless there's been a radical move that affects the way we interpret, say, offside or handball. FIFA's rule-changing arm, the International Football Association Board (**IFAB** (<https://www.theifab.com>)), tends to shy away from necessary changes in favor of tweaking words, muddying definitions, or abolishing some dormant and pointless rule that nobody knew even still existed. This year's no exception.

One thing's for certain — when I take to the field as a referee to start my preseason in Germany, neither players, coaches nor spectators will have bothered reading up on what's new. That will also apply to some of my refereeing colleagues. So as a public service to all who will be out on the field or standing on its sidelines over the coming year, here are the changes to the 2023-24 **"Laws of the Game (<https://bit.ly/3O5pRoe>)."**

### ***"Law 3"***

*A goal scored with an extra player/person on the field is no longer automatically disallowed.*

You may not have noticed, but during the somewhat exciting 2022 World Cup final when Argentina took a 3-2 lead during extra-time, one of their exuberant substitutes had strayed on to the field at the halfway line. According to the old law, that goal should have been disallowed, but fortunately the game's officials turned a blind eye to the infringement. That's prompted IFAB to change the law so that only an attacking player (sanction: direct free-kick) or an extra person (drop ball) affecting the build-up to a goal leads to it being disallowed.

**Commentary:** Soccer's rules are littered with similar pointless or illogical rulings. IFAB would do well to thoroughly review the entire booklet and inject it with more clarity, simplifications and common-sense. Though it has just produced a booklet called 'Football Rules' (a title that will delight my colleague Paul Gardner), a "simplified version [which] has a more common and straightforward language and uses a simpler structure, to provide an easier understanding of the rules for fans and football enthusiasts."

### ***"Law 6."***

*The assistant reserve referee may now express an opinion.*

Previously, in those professional games where a reserve assistant referee was appointed, they were not allowed to assist the other designated 'on-field' match officials (the center ref, the two ARs, the fourth official, and the VARs). Now, they can.

**Commentary:** Again, it's hard to understand why this was not previously the case. As IFAB points out in its own explanation, "it is... logical that they should be able to give the same assistance to the referee as the other 'on-field' match officials", if they've seen something (like an off-ball act of violence) that the other officials have missed.

### ***"Law 7."***

*Added time should take goal celebrations into account.*

As they always should have, but the words "goal celebrations" have now been expressly added to the list of reasons for added time.

**Commentary:** The 2022 World Cup saw referees adding far more realistic amounts of added time to each half. That was a FIFA edict, but subsequent club competitions haven't really followed up. **I've written before about the need to expunge time-wasting from soccer (<https://www.socceramerica.com/publications/article/92151/time-wasting->**

**why-do-we-tolerate-it.html)** and how implementing the current rules never goes far enough. For example, an automatic yellow card and an extra two minutes of added time for every time-wasting offence would quickly prompt players to re-think their habitual lack of sportsmanship.



### ***"Law 10."***

*Re-phrasing 'kicks from the penalty mark'*

For penalty shootouts, the term 'kicks from the penalty mark' has been replaced by 'penalties (penalty shootout)'. A re-wording also clarifies another recent rule change, that cautions from open play are not carried in to the penalty shootout.

**Commentary:** Micro-tweaking. I don't know anyone who ever used the term 'kicks from the penalty mark,' so I suppose this change does no harm. Which is sometimes as much as you can hope for from IFAB's meddling.

### ***"Law 11."***

*What constitutes 'deliberate play' by a defender in offside situations*

IFAB has attempted to clarify what it means when a defending player deliberately plays the ball to an attacker who was in an offside position when their teammate previously played the ball forward. So they've added a few paras of text stating, for example, that deliberate play means "*a player has control of the ball with the possibility of passing the ball to a teammate, gaining possession of the ball, or clearing the ball.*" It then posits various

situations that remind me of the arduous and now partially rescinded handball ruling of a few years back — that is, it describes situations in great detail where a referee really will not have time to recall what they once read in Law 11, which now includes all of the following:

*The following criteria should be used, as appropriate, as indicators that a player was in control of the ball and, as a result, can be considered to have 'deliberately played' the ball:*

- *The ball traveled from distance and the player had a clear view of it*
- *The ball was not moving quickly*
- *The direction of the ball was not unexpected*
- *The player had time to coordinate their body movement, i.e. it was not a case of instinctive stretching or jumping, or a movement that achieved limited contact/control*
- *A ball moving on the ground is easier to play than a ball in the air*

**Commentary:** I appreciate that IFAB is trying to explain the difference between a deflection and a deliberate attempt to play the ball. Good luck to my fellow referees, though, when considering all of the above factors while making a split-second decision. As we've seen with handball, it makes absolutely no sense to enshrine this kind of wording in the rules. By all means, add guidelines as an addendum to the "laws," but I feel for young referees who are being assessed, and who have some of the above quoted back at them when having made a perceived error on an offside call.

### ***"Law 12."***

*Clarifying a 'challenge for the ball' in DOGSO situations*

When a player attempts to play the ball in their own penalty area and fouls an opponent with a clear goalscoring opportunity, it's a spot-kick and a yellow card (it would be red if the foul was committed outside of the penalty area). IFAB has added words to make this "an attempt to play the ball or challenge for the ball."

**Commentary:** I don't see how this is in any way helpful. What on earth is the difference between an attempt to play the ball and a challenge for the ball? IFAB's baffling explanation is that "it is not always clear whether an action was an attempt to play the ball or a challenge for the ball (or both)." I'm so glad that I don't have to sit in on their meetings.

### ***"Law 12."***

*Leniency for coaches who cannot control their players*

A recent rule made coaches responsible for the sideline behavior of their teams if, say, an individual who insulted the AR behind their back could not be identified among the numerous people nowadays assigned places on the bench. Now, if a substitute warming up behind the goal, for example, insults an opponent and the referee can't determine who uttered the insult, then the coach — on the other side of the field - no longer takes the caution.

**Commentary:** While this seems like a fair change, I would argue that a coach is still responsible for their players' conduct during the game and around the field of play. A player who would insult an opponent from behind the goal has not been well-coached.

Does this mean such an offense would now go unpunished? An alternative would be to collectively ban the players warming up in that area from being subbed into the game (via a clear signal to the fourth official), unless the culprit confesses.

### ***"Law 14."***

*Goalkeepers must behave better at penalty kicks*

Additional text to Law 14 states that before a penalty kick, the goalkeeper "must remain on the goal line, facing the kicker, between the goalposts, without touching the goalposts, crossbar or goal net, until the ball has been kicked. The goalkeeper must not behave in a way that unfairly distracts the kicker, e.g. delay the taking of the kick or touch the goalposts, crossbar or goal net."

**Commentary:** A welcome rap on the knuckles for those irritating, hyperactive stoppers indulging in child-like gamesmanship.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Summary**

The customary mish-mash of tortured clarifications, superfluous re-wordings, and over-complicated re-definitions, with the odd helpful minor change thrown in just to show that IFAB is not completely dysfunctional. Its abolition is long overdue, however. IFAB must be replaced by a democratic, accountable, transparent and forward-thinking body made up of individuals who have a proper understanding of soccer and the way it works, at all levels. Yes, I am available.

• ***To download 2023-24 rulebooks in various languages go HERE***  
(<https://bit.ly/3O5pRoe>).

**Photo: Mike Woitalla**

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**13 comments** about "Soccer's Rules: What's changed for the 2023-24 season".

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**Santiago 1314 (/people/Santiago/)**, July 21, 2023 at 11:33 a.m.

Oh My.!!?!?!

Could you Re-Write this in English.???

I Couldn't make Heads or Tails of this....

My German is Not very Good... (sarc) :)

**Reply ()**

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**R2 Dad (/people/R2Dad/)**, July 21, 2023 at 12:23 p.m.

Law 11 is a bridge too far. Can FIFA take back control of LOTG updates? IFAB has been running the laws into a ditch since they gained this power. Thanks for pointing this out--and it doesn't even include the massive change in Offside that some Euro leagues are implementing this fall.

**Reply ()**

**Santiago 1314 (/people/Santiago/)** replied, July 22, 2023 at 3:30 p.m.

R2; I don't think FIFA has ever been in Charge of the "Laws"  
It was one of the "Compromises" to get the Brits into Fifa.

**Kent James (/people/44184/)**, July 21, 2023 at 1:33 p.m.

There seems to be a recent theme of bowing to common practices; penalty kicks (instead of kicks from the mark), handball instead of handling (not sure when that came about), both of which are reasonable. Not a fan of doing that with regards to actually calling a handball, where FIFA adopted the "if it benefits the team of the person whose arm it touched" it now gets called. While the general public always thought that if the ball touched an arm it was a handball (especially if the touch helped the player who touched its team), I like the consistency of the earlier interpretation that if you didn't move your arm to the ball, it didn't matter where the ball went if it inadvertently bounced off a player's arm (players should not be punished for having arms, only if they were using them to cheat). Now, to appease the crowd, refs call those inadvertent strikes. Seems like we've given in to vigilante justice instead of the rule of law on that one.

As for the difference between "challenging for the ball" and "attempts to play the ball" I'm not sure what they are trying to clarify, but it seems to me they are different; in the first case, the opponent has the ball, in the second, the ball is not in anyone's possession. Looking at the whole rule I don't think that's it. I think they are actually trying to make sure a player who challenges for the ball without attempting to play it (by grabbing a player, e.g.) can be held accountable. I don't think any referees would have trouble with calling such a foul without the clarification, but they probably just want to make sure.

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