Football Officiating When in Doubt Principles

When in doubt principles are axioms of football officiating. When these principles are followed, they allow us to get the call right more times than not.

When you have a call, and are in good position to make the call, and you have seen the whole play, then just make the call. However, when you have primary responsibility for the call and for whatever reason you did not see the whole play, you need to use the axioms to have a better shot at making the correct call.

When you are not the official with primary responsibility for the call, these axioms do not apply to you. You can have an opinion, but it's not your call. If the covering official needs your help, you can state your opinion, tell them what you saw, but it's not your call to make. It is okay to stop the game clock to discuss a call and come to a consensus. In high school football there is no instant replay to help you out unless State Associations allow for it in special circumstances.

1. **"When in question, the player is defenseless." -** Rule 2-32-16. See Rule 9-4-3p for further understanding. Set the tone for what's not acceptable.
2. **When in doubt, it's a touchback rather than a safety**. Don't put cheap points on the board and then make the team give up the ball on the ensuing free kick.
3. **When in doubt, the forward pass is incomplete rather than complete and a fumble.** More times than not, the receiver never controlled the ball long enough to do something common to the game, like taking a step and running with it. **This holds true for interceptions too.**
4. **When in doubt, the passer has thrown the ball forward rather than fumbling it.** Any action by the QB's arm moving forward and the ball coming out should be ruled a forward pass.
5. **When in doubt, the pass is forward rather than backward *behind* the line of scrimmage.** The official on the sideline opposite the direction that the pass is thrown is responsible for punching the ball backward. If the signal mechanic is not there, the covering official needs to kill the play immediately.
6. **When in doubt, the pass is forward rather than backward *beyond* the line of scrimmage.** Beyond the line of scrimmage, the benefit of doubt goes to the pass being backward.
7. **When in doubt, the runner is in-bounds rather than out of bounds**. Don't take away yardage.
8. **When in doubt, the runner fumbled the ball rather than being down.** If the runner can't maintain control of the ball while being tackled, don't bail him out and rule him down.
9. **When in doubt the ball did not cross the plane of the goal rather than it being a touchdown**. Don't put points on the board. Crash in and see the ball break the plane of the goal.

10. **When in doubt, it is a false start rather than illegal motion**. The difference is that a false start is a dead ball foul, and illegal motion is a live ball foul. Don't bring back a 65-yard touchdown play when you can shut it down before it develops.
11. **When in doubt, it is a block below the waist rather than a block above the waist.** Player safety is one of our most important responsibilities. **The same holds true for a chop block, clipping, and a blindside block.** It is easier to pick up a flag than it is to throw one after the trainer is called to attend to a player.
12. **When in doubt, a defensive player that is being double teamed is being double teamed rather than held**. Make sure that it is not a chop block, however.
13. **When in doubt, the ball was snapped before the play clock ran out.** Give the offense the benefit of the doubt. Referee, tell the QB to hustle things up. Wing official, tell the coach to hustle things up.
14. **When in doubt, if there are two wideouts on your side, one is on the line, and the other is in the backfield.** Put them both on the line or both in the backfield only if there is no other option and then talk to the coach. (Note: Both on the line is fine if it's a running play, and both in the backfield is okay if there are no more than four players from the offense in the backfield.)
15. **When in doubt, it is roughing the kicker rather than running into the kicker.** There's the opinion that if the kicking leg is hit, the call should be running into the kicker, and if the plant leg is hit or the kicker is annihilated, it should be roughing. Save running into the kicker only for contact that needs to be called but never puts the kicker at risk. And use your best judgement to determine if the kicker is acting in order to get a flag.
16. **When in doubt it is a 15-yard personal foul for face masking penalty rather than a 5-yard incidental grasping penalty.** Defenders rarely just grasp the facemask. Most of the time they grab, yank, twist, or pull.
17. **When in doubt, the ball is accidentally batted or kicked rather than intentionally batted or kicked.** Make sure that the bat or kick is obvious and intentional for everyone to see. Don't go looking for a reason to throw your flag.

These "when in doubt" principles will help bail you out more times than not and can be a game saver, but they don't excuse you from the responsibility of why you are an official. Learn from them when you must use them. Don't' ball watch, and don't officiate air. Put yourself in position to make the call by using the sound officiating mechanics, rule knowledge and understanding, and good common sense.

Sources:

Football Axioms…When in Doubt Principles: Know When They Apply!
Bill LeMonnier, USA Football Officiating Consultant: Publication date unknown

Referee.com; When in Doubt, Solved; November 4, 2020

Referee.com; "When In Doubt" Judgment Guidelines; May 21, 2025