

Targeting and Player Safety



Making the Future of Football Safer

Busting 4 myths about college football's targeting rule

Here's the whole rule, followed by some common misconceptions about it.

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In college football, these things are targeting fouls, per the NCAA's rulebook:

1. Making "forcible contact against an opponent with the helmet crown," or the top of the tackler's head.
2. Making "forcible contact to the head or neck area of a defenseless opponent."

A targeting foul is an auto-ejection, and if it occurs in the second half, it includes a suspension for the first half of the following game.

A "defenseless opponent" includes, but isn't limited to, a player:

- in the act of, or having just thrown, a pass
- who's catching a pass or kick (or trying to) and hasn't had time to become a "ball carrier."
- who's in the act of kicking, or has just kicked
- on the ground, or a player out of the play
- who gets blind-side blocked
- who has the ball and has had his forward progress stopped
- who has the ball and is sliding or given himself up
- A QB after he's thrown a pick or someone's fumbled the ball away

For a play to be targeting, it also has to have at least one “indicator.”

- Launching, or “leaving his feet to attack an opponent by an upward and forward thrust of the body to make forcible contact in the head or neck area”
- A crouch and upward thrust to make head or neck contact, even if the hitter still has feet on the ground
- Leading with the “helmet, shoulder, forearm, fist, hand or elbow to attack with forcible contact at the head or neck area”
- “Lowering the head before attacking by initiating forcible contact with the crown of the helmet”

That’s the whole rule. Here are four common misconceptions about it.

Misconception No. 1: Targeting just means “helmet-to-helmet hits.”

Any “forcible” hit with the crown is targeting, no matter where it strikes. A player could launch crown-first into a player’s hand, and that’d be targeting, by the letter of the rule. More commonly, you’ll see targeting calls after crown-to-ribcage hits.

Misconception No. 2: The targeting rule means nobody can hit anybody in the head.

Not all targeting hits are helmet-to-helmet, and not all helmet-to-helmet hits are targeting.

If a player hits an opponent in the head but doesn't lead with the crown, the hit might not be targeting, unless the opponent could be considered "defenseless."

Officials don't usually consider running backs defenseless if they're just running between the tackles, for instance. Linemen butt heads almost every play, and that's consistently allowed.

Misconception No. 3: Targeting only covers hits on players who have the ball.

Heavy hits to the head of "defenseless" players are targeting. Those explicitly include kickers, players getting blocked from the blind side, and receivers going for the ball.

Misconception No. 4: Targeting only applies if the player's giving himself up.

This one comes up a lot when quarterbacks take off running. "He's still a runner," someone might say, or "he hasn't slid to give himself up." Those are things that would make him "defenseless," but he can still be targeted via the crown of the helmet rule.

The targeting rule can be hard to apply, even if you study it closely.

The rule is imperfect, tricky to enforce fairly at game speed, and has plenty of critics, especially when a call goes against a popular team.

But the gray area is a feature, not a bug. What makes a “forcible” hit is subjective, even if it’s sometimes obvious. So much is inherently left to interpretation.

The spirit of the rule is crystal-clear. The NCAA doesn’t like players using their heads to hit, or *getting hit* in the head. If you’re someone who has a vested interest in the survival of this sport, those are hard principles to argue, though we can always lobby to have the fairest rules possible.



“TARGETING” – means that a player takes aim at an opponent for purposes of attacking with forcible contact that goes beyond making a legal tackle or a legal block or playing the ball. *Some indicators of targeting include but are not limited to:*

HIGH INDICATORS THAT TARGETING HAS OCCURRED.

- **LAUNCH** – a player leaving his feet to attack an opponent by an upward and forward thrust of the body to make *forcible contact in the head or neck area.*
- **THRUST** - A crouch followed by an upward and forward thrust to attack with *forcible contact at the head or neck area,* even though one or both feet are still on the ground.
- **STRIKE** - leading with helmet, shoulder, forearm, fist, hand or elbow to attack *with forcible contact at the head or neck area.*
- **CROWN** - lowering the head before attacking by *initiating forcible contact with the crown of the helmet.*

LOW INDICATORS LIKELY TARGETING HAS NOT OCCURRED:

- *Head - up*
- *Wrap -up tackle*
- *Head to the side*
- *Changing position*