

## The History of Offside by Julian Carosi 28 December 2003

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The word off-side derives from the military term "off the strength of his side". When a soldier is "off the strength", he is no longer entitled to any pay, rations or privileges. He cannot again receive these unless, and until he is placed back "on the strength of his unit" by someone other than himself.

In football, if a player is off-side, he is said to be "out of play" and thereby not entitled to play the ball, nor prevent the opponent from playing the ball, nor interfere with play. He has no privileges and cannot place himself "on-side". He can only regain his privileges by the action of another player, or if the ball goes out of play.

The origins of the off-side law began in the various late 18th and early 19th century "football" type games played in English public schools, and descended from the same sporting roots found in the game of Rugby. A player was "off his side" if he was standing in front of the ball (between the ball and the opponents' goal). In these early days, players were not allowed to make a forward pass. They had to play "behind" the ball, and made progress towards the oppositions' goal by dribbling with the ball or advancing in a scrum-like formation. It did not take long to realise, that to allow the game to flow freely, it was essential to permit the forward pass, thus raising the need for a properly structured off-side law.

It was up to the individual clubs (or the association to which they belonged) to decide which set of numerous Laws to adopt. The Cambridge (1848), Sheffield (1857), Uppingham (1862) and the then newly formed Football Association of 1863, all had slightly different laws (or rules as they were better known in those days).

**1810-1850:** There were several Public School rules written around this period, the known ones of which are shown below:

No player may stop between the ball and his adversaries' goal so as to get it when his own side kicks it there. If he is unavoidably in such a position and the ball be kicked towards him, he may not kick it himself nor try to prevent the opposite side from having a fair kick at it. A ball kicked in transgression of this rule *cannot* obtain a goal. There is, however, this exception; when a player kicks off from his goal line, the forwards of his side may stop near the adversaries' goal in order to get the ball, and prevent them from returning it. (Winchester).

A player off-side is to consider himself out of the game, and is not to touch the ball in any case whatever nor in anyway interrupt the play or obstruct any player. A player is on-side when the ball has been kicked or touched by any player on the opposite side. (Rugby).

No off-side play is allowed. If the umpire shall see a player touch the ball when he is off-side, he shall be out 'off-side', upon which the player must immediately leave the ball alone, or, if he be on the ground, wait until an opponent comes up. Anyone infringing this rule, after being warned, will be turned out of the game (Cheltenham).

When the ball is kicked, anyone on the same side but *nearer* to the opposite goal is said to be 'behind' or off-side unless at least one of the opponents be between him and the party who kicked the ball. Anyone who is thus off-side as considered as being virtually out of the game, and he must wait until the ball has been touched by one of the opposite side, nor must he interfere with any opponent or in anyway prevent or obstruct him getting the ball (Harrow).

These various rules remained basically the same for a number of years. A player was deemed to be off-side simply by being "nearer to the line of the opponent's base (goal line) than the kicker". The only way to advance the ball up the field of play was to dribble it. A similar tactic to that used in Rugby was to form a line of players VERTICALLY or DIAGONALLY down the field of play, dribble the ball forwards and then pass the ball BACKWARDS along the line

from player to player (similar to today's Rugby passing). It was like dribbling the ball two steps forwards and then passing the ball one step backwards!

**1847:** The Eton College Rule described an off-side player to be "sneaking" by stating:

A player is considered '*sneaking*' when only three or less than three of the opposite side are before him and the ball behind him, and in such a case, he may not kick the ball.

This was the first off-side rule to resemble the modern law, and now allowed players to receive a FORWARD pass if MORE THAN THREE opponents were between them and the opponents' goal line. This early term for "off-side" was known as "sneaking".

**1848 The Cambridge rules:** Following the evolution of the various rules used in the English public schools, the next stage of the development of the Laws belongs to Universities, particularly the Cambridge University, where young men were already versed in the particular football traditions of their own previous schools. There became a need to avoid confusion by amalgamating all the principles embodied in the various school rules. A meeting was held in Trinity College, Cambridge, in October, where a mutually agreed set of rules was formed.

**1856:** Sadly, a copy of the original 1848 Cambridge Rules has not survived. But an 1856 version entitled 'Laws of the University Foot Ball Club', was discovered over a hundred years later in the Library of Shrewsbury School, and it may be taken as practicably a copy of the original 1848 version.

The Cambridge off-side Rule No.9 stated.

If the ball has passed a player and has come from the direction of his own goal, he may not touch it till the other side have kicked it, unless there are more than three of the other side before him. No player is allowed to loiter between the ball and the adversaries' goal.

**1855 The Sheffield Rules:** The first "football club" (as distinct from a university or a public school team) was the Sheffield Foot Ball Club, formed in 1855, mainly by some Old Boys from Harrow. There were no off-side rules in the original Sheffield Club Rules of 1856. They did not adopt the 'MORE THAN THREE' opponents philosophy. Players known as "kick throughs" were positioned permanently near the opponents goal. There was no limit on team size, and whatever size or shape of ball that happened to be handy was used. Referees were unnecessary, as the two captains would settle any dispute.

**1862: Uppingham School Rules:** The Master at Uppingham School, the Rev. J.C. Thring (who was at Cambridge when the 1846 University Club was formed), issued a more specific set of rules entitled 'The Simplest Game'.

The Uppingham off-side Rule No. 9 stated:

A player is 'out of play' immediately he is in front of the ball and must return behind the ball as soon as possible. If the ball is kicked by one of his own side past a player who is "out of play, he may not touch it, kick it or advance it, until one of the other side has first kicked it or one of his own side, having followed it up, has been able, when in front of him to kick it.

The Uppingham rules of 1862 remained strictly against the forward pass.

The definitions of "how can a player who is off-side can return to an 'on-side' position" came from these early off-side definitions.

There are four ways, that this can happen:

- (1) The player is **not in front** of the ball when it is next played by one of his team.
- (2) The position of the opponents change so the off-side player is no longer in an off-side

position when the ball is next played by one of his team.

(3) An opponent intentionally plays or gains possession of the ball.

(4) The ball goes out of play.

The off-side player cannot put himself on-side until someone else, plays the ball - or the ball goes out of play.

**1863:** There was only one game known as football, but it continued to be played under a variety of rules.

The Football Association (FA) was formed in 1863, consisting of eleven member clubs. The first FA meeting was held at the Freemasons Tavern, Great Queen Street in London.

The previous Cambridge off-side rule of 1848, included the three player stipulation, but strangely, this was omitted from their later 1863 amended version which read:

When a player has kicked the ball, any one of the same side who is nearer to the opponents' goal line is *out of play* and may not touch the ball himself nor in anyway whatsoever prevent any other player from doing so.

The first set of 14 Football Association rules were agreed on 1 Dec 1863 .

FA Rule 6 covering off-side (based on the revised Cambridge 1863 version above) stated:

When a player has kicked the ball any one of the same side who is nearer to the opponents' goal-line is out of play and may not touch the ball himself nor in any way whatever prevent any other player from doing so until the ball has been played, but no player is out of play when the ball is kicked from behind the goal-line.

**1866:** The Football Association adopt the previous 1848/56 Cambridge off-side ruling of three players, and this remained the same until 1925. Sheffield (who had no off-side rules) eventually came into line with The Football Association's (three player) off-side version.

The first player to be caught off-side in an official Football Association game was Charles W Alcock on 31 March 1866 during a match between the FA and Sheffield. Alcock joined the FA committee and became the founder of the FA Cup, captain of the Wanderers team, and organised the first ever international match - as well as becoming a football umpire. Goal kicks became exempt from off-side in 1866.

The Sheffield Foot Ball Club, offered to play a representative side from the Football Association, and because of the differing sets of rules used by both parties, basic conditions were laid down.

Rule 6 read:

Off-side: Any player between an opponents' goal and goalkeeper (unless he has followed the ball there) is *off-side* and *out of play*. The goalkeeper is that player on the defending side, who, for the time being, is nearest to his goal.

This is the first time that the term "off-side" is incorporated in a Law, and the idea of a player designated "goalkeeper" is introduced. Another important landmark here in Law 12, is the first introduction into the Laws, of the Referee.

Each Umpire shall be Referee in that half of the field nearest the goal defended by the party nominating him.

**1870:** With the game assuming a wider sphere through international fixtures and Cup Ties, there was a need for uniformity of Law between The Football Association, the Scottish FA formed in 1873, the FA of Wales (1876), the Sheffield Association (1867), Birmingham & District (1875), and many other county associations - all wishing to play against each other . The Secretary of the FA wrote:

To effect a code of rules that shall unite all the various differences under one recognized head may emphatically be described as the ruling principle of those who, under its management, seek a healthy reform of what maybe regarded as football abuses.

**1877:** The Football Association and the Sheffield Association agree on one uniform code of The Laws of the Game.

**1873:** The concept of penalising off-side only at "the moment of kicking" (i.e. the moment the ball is played) was introduced.

**1878:** It was the eventual official merger of the rules of the Sheffield and The Football Association in 1878 that provided the standard platform for the growth of the game worldwide.

**1880:** Goal kicks had been exempt from the rule from the beginning, but an added clause specified "last played by an opponent". The Referee is written into FA rules.

**1881-82:** Corner kicks become exempt from off-side.

**1882:** A conference was held in Manchester on December 6<sup>th</sup>, where certain alterations to the existing Laws were agreed by representatives of the four British Associations (England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales). There were no changes made to the off-side Law.

**1885:** The Manchester Conference of 1882, led to the creation of the "International Football Association Board" who became the single Law authority. To begin with, the International Board consisted of two representatives from each of the four United Kingdom Associations, England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Today, the International Football Association Board (IFAB) consists of the four UK associations, and FIFA. Each shall be entitled to be represented by four delegates. Because the first Laws were historically promulgated in England, the authentic text is written in English and then translated into other languages.

The FA issues a code of rules, in the very first attempt to provide instruction and advice to match officials. It was 1896 before the second edition appeared.

**1888:** The Football League was formed, followed in 1890 by the Scottish League

**1891:** Umpires were abolished to the touchline as linesmen, and the Referee is introduced - operating for the first time on the field of play.

**1893:** W. Pickford along with some devoted helpers, forms The Referees' Association, on the initiative of the future FA Secretary F. J. Wall assisted by A. Roston Burke.

**1896:** The first "Referees Chart" (now known as the Laws of Association Football) was issued by the FA and are kept at the FA headquarters in London. The Chart has been issued almost annually since that date.

**1898:** The Laws reached 17 in number, and has remained 17 until the present day.

**1904:** FIFA is formed.

**1907:** Off-side is now limited to the opponent's half of the half of field of play only.

**1921:** Throw-ins become exempted from off-side.

**1922:** Under the heading "Advice to Players" the following (original Referees' Chart) advice was updated to read:

When standing off-side you have no right to impede an opponent nor to station yourself so near to the goalkeeper or any other opponent as to hamper his movements or obstruct his sight of the ball.

**1924:** The International Board decided that:

If a player who is in an off-side position advances towards an opponent or the ball and, in so doing, causes the play to be affected, he should be penalised for "interfering with play."

To be penalised, players now had to be in a close physical relationship to the ball or to an opponent who is in a position to play or attempt to play the ball.

**1925-26:** This was an important phase in the history and development of the off-side Law. The "three-opponent" rule had remained basically unchanged until now. Following a proposal by the Scottish FA, the International Board, meeting in Paris on 13 June 1925, decided that the simple answer to the problem, was to reduce from three to two the number of defenders who could place an attacker off-side. The law was promptly altered for season 1925-1926 so that a player could not be off-side if two (instead of three) opponents were nearer to their own goal line when the ball was played. The 1925 rule remained in force until after World Cup, Italy in 1990. Under the old rule that had been in force since 1867, defending players would play further up the field. By keeping in a diagonal line, the defenders easily caught attacking players off-side as they advanced past the foremost defender. And should an attacking player run through after a long ball, he still had the other defending player to beat and the goalkeeper.

Defending players had this law worked to such a fine art, that in the early 1920's the full-backs had developed an almost fool-proof tactic to catch attacking players off-side. They would position themselves almost up to the halfway line, one staggered slightly behind the other, enabling them to catch attacking players off-side with such success, that the game had so many stoppages for off-side offences, it became monotonous. Credit for exposing and exploiting the old rule is usually given to a full-back who played for Newcastle, Billy McCracken, who with this full-back partner would advance to as near the halfway line as possible (a player cannot be off-side in his own half), moving up quickly and timing their runs, so as they would often catch two or three forwards off-side. Opponents could find no way to master this tactic, which very quickly caught on with other teams.

The alteration from three to two dramatically decreased the off-side offences. In the season 1925-26, goals scored in the Football League were a third up at 6,373 compared to the old off-side law era 1924-25 season's tally of 4,700. Although crowds relished the glut of goals, perceptive observers saw a sudden decline in the quality of the game. The law change also meant that the defending players were forced to play squarer to each other and much nearer to their goal - but not too near as to allow the attacker to shoot without first beating them to the ball. Attacking players began to use the long ball played between the two defenders, and made more use of their wingers who (with only 2 full-backs being employed) had ample space to ply their trade.

In 1925, Yorkshireman, Herbert Chapman (a modest player with half a dozen clubs, and later a manager with Huddersfield) eventually became manager of Arsenal. Chapman (on advice from the veteran inside-forward Arsenal player Charlie Buchan) changed the role of the all-purpose midfield player, and evolved and refined a new extra defensive position called the 'centre-half', whose job it became to block off the 'through ball', and to cover the wingers if they beat the other two defenders. The 'stopper' had arrived; and other teams soon followed this idea. The standard 2-3-5 formation (two full-backs, three half-backs and five forwards), became 3-3-4. Deep-lying inside forwards began to adopt pincer-movement goal-raiding tactics known as the 'W' plan. Having a centre-half in the team, meant one less player concentrating on attacking, thus enforcing an initial negative type of defensive play that has taken many years to develop into the more offensive and exiting counter-attacking style that we enjoy today.

**1937-38:** The off-side Law was remodelled along with the rest of the Laws in 1938 by the Secretary of the FA Mr Stanley F. Rous (as he then was), and was accepted by the IFAB in June 1938. The present Laws are based on this 1938 version. Off-side becomes Law XI (Now know as Law 11).

**1956:** Law XI International Board Decision (IBD) 1 is introduced:

1. Off-side shall not be judged at the moment the player in question receives the ball, but at the moment when the ball is passed to him by one of his own side. A player who is not in an off-side position when one of his colleagues passes the ball to him or takes a free-kick, does not therefore become off-side if he goes forward during the flight of the ball.

A player does not necessarily infringe this Law if he is in an off-side position and moves a little way beyond the boundary of the field of play to show clearly to the referee that he is not interfering with play, but if the referee considers that such a

movement has a tactical aim, or is, in any way, a feint and the player takes part in the game immediately after, then the referee should blow his whistle for 'off-side.'

It is interesting to note in the last sentence above, that "stepping off the field of play" to indicate non-involvement in active play, has been around for many years, and is not a modern invention!

**1974:** On July 9, 1974, the Football Association of Wales, introduced a proposal at the annual meeting of the International Football Association Board (IFAB), to change the off-side paragraph (c) wording describing when a player was NOT off-side.

The proposal was to replace the following existing text *"The ball last touched an opponent or was last played by him"* with; *"The ball was last played by an opponent"*.

The reason given for the proposed change was: *"For a player to be placed 'on-side' when the*

*ball accidentally touches an opponent is contrary to the spirit of the Law. The Referee should have sole discretion as to whether or not a player intentionally plays the ball."*

The proposal included changing the off-side Diagrams 10 and No. 7 from a Not-Off-side to Off-side verdicts. The 1974-1975 diagrams which had been in the Laws for a number of years, showed two scenarios of a goal being allowed after a ball by an attacker was: *"returned by a defending goalkeeper to an offside attacker (Diagram 7)"*. And *"deflected off a defender to another attacking player who was in an off-side position (Diagram 10)"*. The Football Association of Wales proposed that the off-side attacking player who scored the goals in both scenarios, should be penalised for (effectively, now known in the modern game as) **"gaining an advantage by being in that position" and PLAYING A BALL** that rebounds off an opponent having been in an off-side position. Although the proposal by the Football Association of Wales was withdrawn, it eventually led to a subsequent change of the wording in the off-side Law in 1978-1979, and the removal of Diagrams 7 and 10.

**1978-1979:** The off-side Law XI was rewritten: Preceded by the 1974 proposal by FA of Wales to International Board - removed any reference to ball **touching or being played by an opponent**. Penalising off-side is now to be judged at the moment that the ball is played by a team-mate. In the previous 1977-1978 Law XI, a player was not penalised if: *"The ball last touched an **opponent** or was last played by him"*. The 1978-79 amendment below, introduces the important phrase: *"at the moment the ball **touches**, or is played by, **one of his team**"*. Mere deflection of the ball by a defender no longer places an off-side opponent in an on-side position.

#### Law XI Off-Side

(1) A player is in an off-side position if he is nearer to his opponents' goal line than the ball, unless:

(a) he is in his own half of the field of play, or

(b) there are at least two of his opponents nearer their own goal-line than he is.

(2) A player shall only be declared off-side and penalised for being in an off-side position, if, at the moment the ball touches, or is played by, one of his team, he is, in the opinion of the Referee:

(a) interfering with play or with an opponent, or

(b) seeking to gain an advantage by being in that position.

(3) A player shall not be declared off-side by the Referee

(a) merely because of his being in an off-side position, or

(b) if he receives the ball, direct, from a goal-kick, a corner-kick, a throw-in, or when it has been dropped by the Referee.

(4) If a player is declared off-side, the Referee shall award an indirect free-kick, which shall be taken by a player of the opposing team from the place where the infringement occurred, unless the offence is committed by a player in his opponents' goal area, in which case, the free-kick shall be taken from a point anywhere within that half of the goal area in which the offence occurred.

**1990-1991:** Prior to the 1990-1991 season, players were deemed to be off-side if they were level with the second last defender or the last two defenders. A change in Law XI for season 1990-1991 now exempts players who are level with the second last or the last two defenders. This important new clause now gives the advantage to the attacking players and was as follows:

(b) he is not nearer to his opponents' goal-line than at least two of his opponents.

A second paragraph was added to the Law XI International Board Decision (IBD) 1:

2. A player who is level with the second last opponent or with the last two opponents is not in an off-side position.

**1995-1996:** The following two new terms were introduced into the off-side Law:

***It is not an offence in itself to be in an off-side position.***

A player shall only be penalised for being in an off-side position if, at the moment the ball touches, or is played by one of his team, he is ***in the opinion of the referee, involved in active play.***

This clarified the understanding that it is not an offence for a player to be in an off-side position. The Referee can refrain from penalising if in the opinion of the Referee, the player concerned is not interfering with play, nor interfering with an opponent, nor seeking to gain an advantage. This clearly distinguishes between the off-side position and the infringement of being actively involved in play while in that position.

It is interesting to note also in 1995-1996, that the previous Law X1 Off-side phrase "*seeking to gain an advantage by being in that position*" was subtly changed to "*gaining an advantage by being in that position*".

The difference being, that a player only had to make a move (*seeking*) towards the ball to be penalised, whereas, the new phrase implies that an advantage **has** to be gained before a player is penalised.

**1997-1998:** The International Football Association Board (IFAB) radically simplified and updated the wording and completely rewrote all of the Laws of the Game in a simplified version. There was no specific change to Law 11, but the wording became slightly shorter, and the International Board Decisions 1 and 2 were taken out. Interestingly, this is also when the actual word **off-side** had its hyphen removed and became **offside**. And the previously used Roman numerals (for example Law XI Off-side) became Law 11 - Offside.

The offside Law 11 has remained the same from the 1997-1998 season, up to 2003-2004 as shown below:

### **Offside Position**

**It is not an offence in itself to be in an offside position.**

**A player is in an offside position if:**

- he is nearer to his opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second last opponent

**A player is not in an offside position if:**

- he is in his own half of the field of play
- or
- he is level with the second last opponent
- or
- he is level with the last two opponents

**Offence**

A player in an offside position is only penalised if, at the moment the ball touches or is played by one of his team, he is, in the opinion of the referee, involved in active play by:

- interfering with play
- or
- interfering with an opponent or
- or
- gaining an advantage by being in that position

**No Offence**

There is no offside offence if a player receives the ball directly from:

- a goal kick
- or
- a throw-in
- or
- a corner kick

**Infringements/Sanctions**

For any offside offence, the referee awards an indirect free kick to the opposing team to be taken from the place where the infringement occurred.

**2003:** The following FIFA Circular No. 874 was issued on 22 October 2003

Circular No. 847



## Law 11 - OFFSIDE

Dear Sir or Madame,

We would like to inform you about a decision passed at the Annual Business Meeting of the International Football Association Board on 16 September 2003, in order to achieve uniform interpretation of Law 11 "Offside", based on the following principles.

- This is not a change to the Laws of the Game as it adheres entirely to the original wording of the Law.
- The aim of this interpretation is to respect the Laws of the Game and to project attacking play intended to result in a goal, which is the ultimate objective in football.

Law 11 reads as follows: "A player in an offside position is only penalised if, at the moment the ball is touched or played by one of his team, he is, in the opinion of the referee, involved in active play by:

- interfering with play, or
- interfering with an opponent, or
- gaining an advantage by being in that position."

### How should we interpret "interfering with play"?

PLAYING OR TOUCHING a ball passed or touched by a team-mate.

### How should we interpret "interfering with an opponent" ?

PREVENTING an opponent from playing or being able to play the ball. For example, by clearly obstructing the goalkeeper's line of vision or movements.

Making a gesture or movement while standing in the path of the ball to DECEIVE OR DISTRACT AN OPPONENT.

*Note: The following is an addition from UEFA Referees' and Assistant Referees' seminar held in Nyon in September 2003: "A player in an offside position, by his manner and direction of movement, near the path of the ball, in the opinion of the Referee, interferes with an opponent (e.g. getting closer to the path of the ball)."*

*This is more in line with the old phrase "seeking to gain an advantage" in the Offside Laws previous to 1995-1996.*

### How should we interpret "gaining an advantage by being in that position" ?

PLAYING A BALL that rebounds off a post or the crossbar having been in an offside position.

PLAYING A BALL that rebounds off an opponent having been in an offside position.

We are aware that there will always be controversial incidents, but as stipulated in the Laws of the Game, the referee's decision is final. We also believe, however, that with clearer instructions, referees will be in a better position to make informed decisions based on uniform criteria.

Yours faithfully,

FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

Urs Linsi (General Secretary)

The End of the Offside History page.