

Motion - Shift

A Discussion

Bob Masucci

New Jersey Football Officials Association
North Jersey Chapter

The purpose of this article is to stimulate discussion, not to upset the boat. There is a technical difference between an illegal shift and illegal motion. While the difference is completely negligible in terms of penalty enforcement, it's good for all of us to understand that the fouls are different and in most cases distinct.

This work represents the opinions of the author and possibly others. The principles expressed have been arrived at through years of experience and interviews with other officials at all levels of football. They represent how the rules of football are applied at various levels and in various regions. Each reader must filter this work through his own philosophy and through the standards established by his own local associations and/or conferences. Likewise, it is intended to assist officials in the proper application of NF/NCAA football rules and techniques. It is not the definitive word. Should any information included herein be in conflict with any National Federation publication or any NCAA publication, those documents shall prevail.

I've watched a number of games where the referee signals (and says) "illegal shift" when he should more appropriately be signaling "illegal motion" and vice-versa. I wouldn't be too surprised if a great number of officials cannot properly articulate the difference



between a player in motion and a shift. And I'm certain sure that there are a great number of us that can't properly distinguish between what constitutes an illegal shift versus illegal motion.

The good news is that most officials recognize the action—whatever they call it—as illegal. Also, the penalties for both fouls are identical (5 yards from previous spot) and both fouls are considered to have occurred simultaneously with the snap. So there's no real harm done. It's simply a technical mistake.

When in doubt...go to the definitions. Motion and shift are clearly related, but are also very distinct activities.

First of all, there is no Rule 2 definition for "motion." So, we must revert to a more intuitive, Webster-like definition. Simply put, a player is in motion when he is moving. Players moving to the line from their huddle, a player moving from his tight end position to a wide receiver's position, players moving from a two point stance to a three point stance, a deep back moving to the slot, and a variety of other movements.

So, you may ask, what then is a "shift?" Here the term is defined in Rule 2. According to Rule 2-39:

"A shift is the action of one or more offensive players who, after a huddle or after taking set

positions, move to a new set position before the ensuing snap.”¹

Note that the NCAA definition for a shift is different, but both share the same principles. The key word in this definition is “set.” If a player is moving, there is no shift. A shift occurs when the player **stops** moving, i.e. takes a new *set position*. To say it another way, motion always precedes a shift, but a shift only occurs when motion ceases. And another way of thinking about it: Motion occurs over a period of time; a shift occurs at a particular instant in time. Just to clarify, the quarterback is not considered to have shifted or be in motion if he merely moves his head and/or shoulders to call signals. Also, it’s considered acceptable for him to raise and lower his foot as a signal for motion to begin or as a signal to the snapper from the shotgun formation. Neither of these movements is considered a shift or motion.

Restrictions Related to Motion (Rule 7-2-7)

For reasons related to the need for competitive balance between offense and defense, there are restrictions placed on offensive movement at the snap. At the snap,

- Only one offensive player may be in motion (i.e. *moving*)
- That player’s movement must not be taking him closer to his opponent’s goal line at the moment of the snap.
- If the motion is by other than a back, the player in motion shall be at least 5 yards behind his line of scrimmage at the snap.

¹ This definition was simplified back in 1985. Before that time, it was similar to the current NCAA rule. But the Federation rule makers considered it too complicated for their officials to enforce consistently.

Restrictions Related to Shift (Rule 7-2-6)

Likewise, there is a single simple restriction on offensive players related to shifts:

After a huddle or shift all 11 players of A shall come to an absolute stop and shall remain stationary simultaneously without movement of hands, feet, head, or body for at least one second before the snap.

Let’s take some real-life game situations and apply the definitions. At this point, we just want to review the definitions of *motion* and *shift*. We’re not assessing the legality of any of the movements described.

1. Following a huddle, ten offensive players come to the line (in motion) and set in three point stances (shift...actually 10 independent shifts). The QB moves toward the snapper (in motion) and takes a set position behind the snapper (shift). After surveying the defense, he moves his hands to a position under the snapper to receive the snap (a short motion followed by another shift when he becomes stationary). At the QB’s signal, the TE moves (in motion) out to a wide receiver’s position and resets (shift). The QB lifts and lowers his foot (not a shift!) and the deep back moves toward his sideline parallel to the line of scrimmage (in motion). The ball is snapped.
2. After all offensive players are set (shift occurred), a back on the right side moves up to the line (in motion) and resets (shift). The tight end on the left side moves into the backfield (in motion) and resets into a three-point stance (shift). He then rises and moves (in motion) toward the sideline. The ball is snapped.

Plays/Rulings:

Now let's apply the definitions and assess the actions against the restrictions listed in NF 7-2-6 and 7-2-7.

PLAY: Offensive team comes to the line and sets. On the QB's signal, set back A22 goes in motion parallel to the line of scrimmage. The QB then leans forward and assumes his final position under the snapper. A22's motion continues and the ball is snapped. **RULING:** This is an illegal shift and one that's probably often overlooked. Once the QB assumes his stationary position under the snapper, a shift occurs, requiring all eleven players, including A22, to be set for at least one second. Since A22's motion continued into the snap, he was in violation of that restriction.

PLAY: Offensive team comes to the line and sets in a two-point stance. On the QB's signal, the line goes down to their three-point stance and simultaneously set back A15 goes in motion parallel to the line of scrimmage. A15's motion continues and the ball is snapped. **RULING:** This is the "classic" illegal shift and one that's also probably often overlooked. Once the line reaches their three-point stance, a shift occurs, requiring all eleven players, including A15, to be set for at least one second. Since A15's motion continued into the snap, he is in violation of that restriction.

PLAY: Set backs A10 and A32 mistakenly both go in motion on the QB's signal. Their motion is parallel to the line of scrimmage. The ball is snapped (a) while both are still moving, or (b) after A10 stops, realizing that something's wrong, while A32 continues with his motion. **RULING:** In (a) Team A is guilty of illegal motion. They have two players moving at the snap. [Note: this is a foul that a lot of referees mistakenly call an illegal shift.] In (b) A is guilty of an illegal shift. Once A10 stops, he's completed a shift, which requires

all eleven offensive players—including A32—to be set for at least one second.

PLAY: Team A is going in the 'hurry-up' mode. They rush to the line. On signal, the line begins to go to their three-point stance.

As they are going down, the ball is snapped.

RULING: Though clearly illegal, it's tough to determine exactly which type of violation occurred. This is extremely common when the offense is hurrying near the end of the half or the game. In this kind of 'jail-break' situation, you will most likely be right no matter what you rule. If even one of the linemen gets down before the snap, you have a shift.

Therefore, unless the rest of them get down and set for a second, you have an illegal shift. Conversely, if more than one player is moving at the snap, you technically have illegal motion. In truth, you probably have a multiple foul – illegal shift and illegal motion. If one player makes it to a set position, and the other ten are still moving when the ball is snapped, Team A has technically violated both restrictions.

PLAY: Team A is set. QB A10 places his hands under the snapper. Immediately, the snapper snaps the ball. **RULING:** An illegal shift. The QB's movement to his final position under the snapper is a shift once he becomes stationary. Since all eleven players (in particular, the QB) did not remain motionless for the one second required, Team A has violated the shift rule.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Bob Masucci is an information technology contracts manager at AT&T in Piscataway, NJ. Residing in Clinton Township, NJ, Bob is a 25-year football official. During those years, he has officiated in 24 state playoff games, including 11 state finals. As an active member of the North Jersey chapter of the New Jersey Football Officials Association, he has participated in the training and mentoring of new officials and has independently developed a wide array training materials.

