

Is a player on the line or in the backfield...or neither?

The Federation rules regarding player positioning have some parts that are fairly straightforward and a few that are somewhat complicated and difficult to visualize in a game situation. This work is an attempt to assist in a full understanding of definitions NF 2-32-3 (back) and NF 2-32-9 (lineman).

LINEMAN

According to NF 2-32-9, an offensive player is legally **on the line** if he:

- a. is facing his opponent's goal line [fairly easy to understand]
- b. has his shoulders approximately parallel to the goal line [also, fairly easy to grasp]
- c. has his head or foot breaking the plane of an imaginary line drawn parallel to the line of scrimmage through the waist of the snapper when the ball is snapped. [maybe not so easy]

Let's try to explain part c. more clearly with a picture. Take a look at the formation in the figure on the next page. In that formation, player #54 is the snapper. Note the dotted line passing through his waistline. This becomes a frame of reference for determining Team A's linemen. Since players 88, 73, 60, 65, 77, 82, and 36 have a part of their bodies touching that line, they are legally on the line of scrimmage. Since players 25 and 16 fail to touch that line they are **not** legally on the line.

BACK

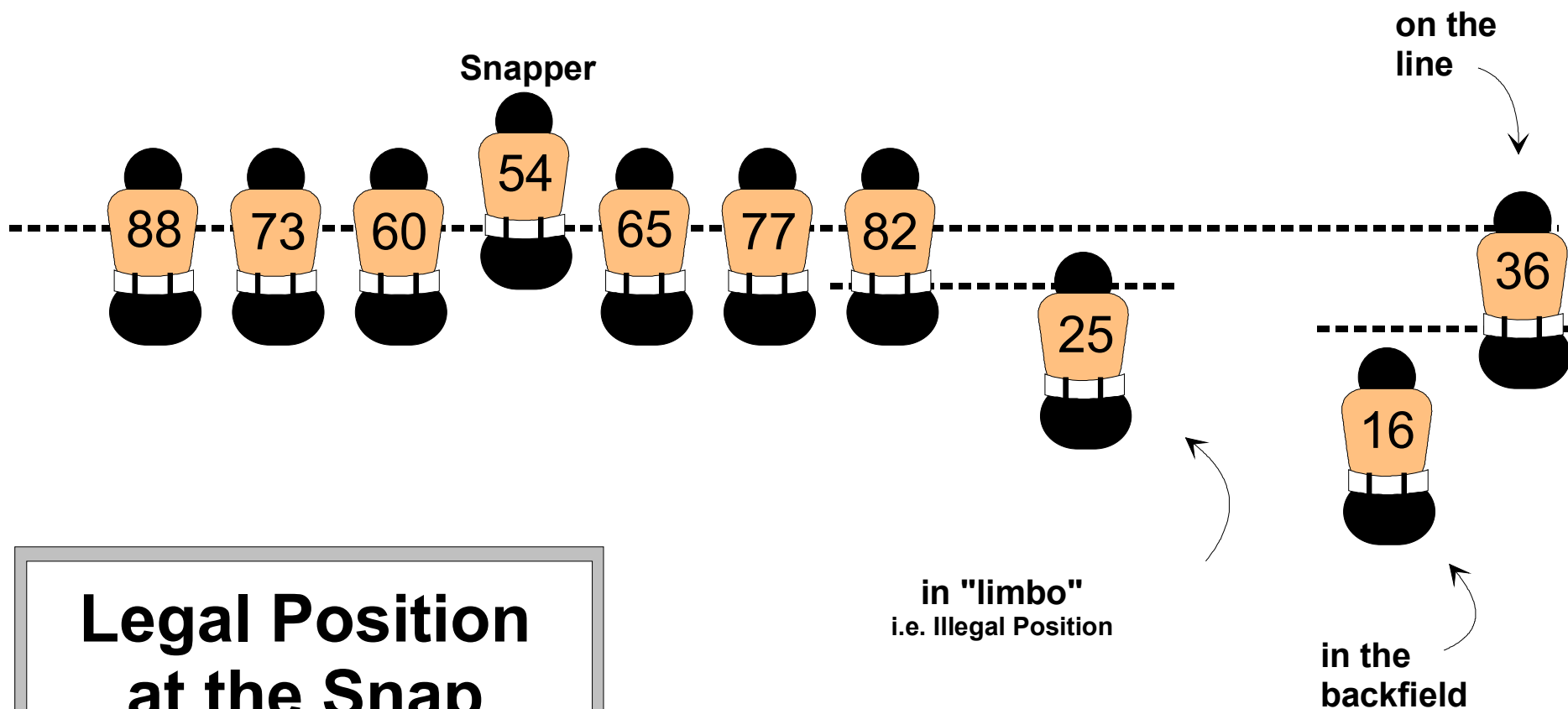
Conversely, NF 2-32-3 defines a back as an offensive player is a **back** if he:

- a. has no part of his body breaking the plane of an imaginary line drawn parallel to the line of scrimmage through the waist of the nearest teammate who is legally on the line [probably not so easy]

Let's go to the figure on the next page to get a better idea of what 2-32-3 is actually saying. The only players that can possibly be considered in the backfield are #25 and #16 since all of the others are legally on the line. Let's start with #16. The legal lineman nearest to him is #36 – the split end. If you draw an imaginary line through #36's waistline, you notice that no part of #16's body touches that line. Therefore, according to the definition, #16 is legally in the backfield. Conversely, when we look at #25, we see a different picture. The legal lineman nearest him is #82. When we draw that imaginary line through #82's waistline, we see that #25's head penetrates that line. According to the definition, #25 is **not** legally a back. Also, from what we saw above, he's not legally on the line. He's in a position commonly referred to as in "limbo" or in "no man's land." – neither on the line nor in the backfield. Some have actually begun calling such a positioned player a "mugwump," harkening back to the 1884 presidential election when a significant number of voters who had abandoned the Republican party—but had not joined the Democratic party—may have turned the tide for Grover Cleveland. But enough history...back to football. This technically is an illegal position at the snap. [Note: There is an exception granted to the QB ("the player under the snapper"). He's considered a back even though he is technically in "limbo."]

Rule 2-32-9

A lineman is any Team A player who is facing his opponent's goal line with the line of his shoulders approximately parallel thereto and with his head or foot breaking the plane of an imaginary line drawn parallel to the line of scrimmage through the waist of the snapper when the ball is snapped.



Legal Position at the Snap

- on the line
- in the backfield

Rule 2-32-3

A back is any Team A player, except for the player under the snapper, who has no part of his body breaking the plane of an imaginary line drawn parallel to the line of scrimmage through the waist of the nearest teammate who is legally on the line except for the player under the snapper, who is also considered a back.

Dealing with these definitions on the field

One piece of advice: don't be too technical in enforcing this. That is, don't penalize a split end who just happens to be an inch or two behind the waistline of the snapper. For all intents and purposes, consider him on the line. Likewise, if a slot back impinges slightly on the waistline of the tight end next to him, ignore it. In general, don't let there be a player "in limbo" at the snap. In your mind declare all players as either on the line or in the backfield.

There are two cases where you want to be a little more technical in enforcing these definitions.

- If a wide receiver comes clearly up to the line (often he'll even let you know "I'm on the line") and there is a player inside of him eligible by number, you must enforce any eligibility requirements specified in NF 7-5-6. Don't 'place' the wide receiver in the backfield just because there's an eligible receiver inside of him on the line. Make sure you let him know "You're on the line" but don't set aside the definition of a lineman in this case.
- In shotgun or scrimmage kick formations, some teams attempt to gain an advantage by positioning their offensive linemen well back from the snapper, or in an inverted "V" formation—like geese flying south. This will allow them to get a better angle on defenders coming from the corners of the defensive line. In such situations, there may be no players whatsoever on the line other than the snapper! Don't allow this! It provides an unfair advantage to the offense.