

Understanding FIFA Law 11: Offside

One of the most difficult laws of the game to understand and enforce is the rule of off-sides. The law is open to referee discretion and has various nuances that make it subjective to say the least. There are times during a game when a player can be in an off-side position, but not violate the off-side rule. However, there are other times when a player receives the ball in an on-side position that violates the off-side rule. Finally, there are areas of the field, as well as moments during a game, in which the off-side rule doesn't apply at all.

The purpose of this article is to help explain what is and what is not off-sides. It is not meant to be a tactical article on when to try to implement the Law of Off-sides to your advantage through running an off-sides trap. Instead it is intended to offer an explanation along with simple scenarios that often occur during the course of a game to paint a clear picture of the Law of Off-sides.

Rule- A player is in an **off-side position** if he/she is nearer to his/her opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second to last opponent. (In almost all cases the opposition goal keeper will be one of the two opponents keeping a player on-side)

Note:

A player is not in an off-side position if:

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

Off-side Offence/Violation- A player in an off-side position is only penalized 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
- Interfering with an opponent
- Gaining an advantage by being in that position

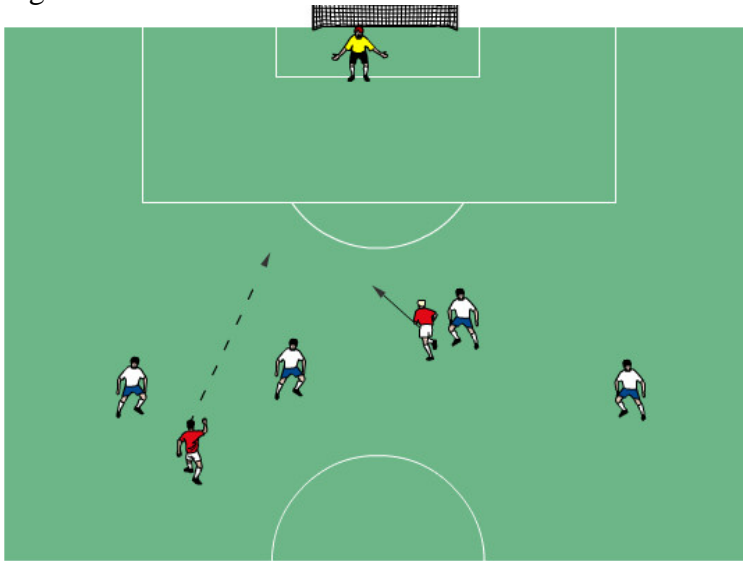
No Off-side Offence/Violation- The off-side law is not applicable when a player receives the ball from:

- A goal kick
- A throw-in
- A corner kick

If a player is deemed to be off-sides by the referee the opposing team is rewarded an indirect free kick from the place where the violation occurred.

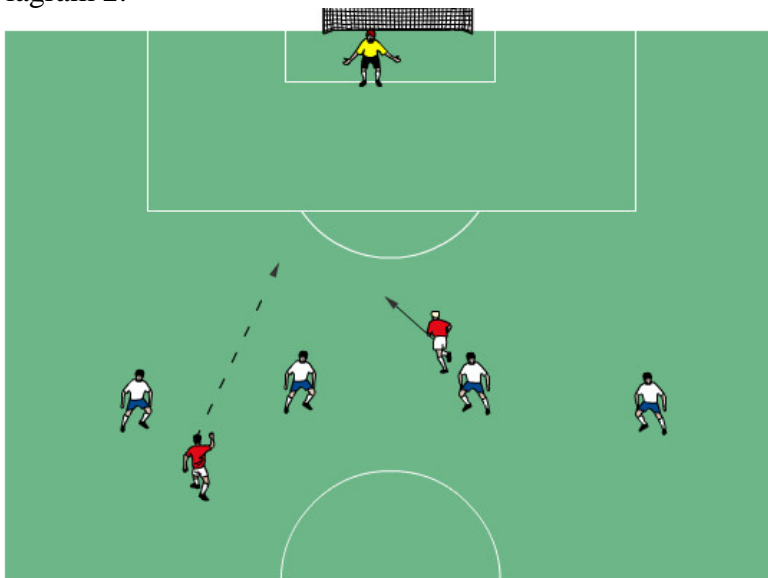
Let's continue by looking at several examples of what is and what is not off-sides. Please note that all diagrams are shown on half of a field since, as the law states, you cannot be off-sides in your own half of the field.

Diagram 1:



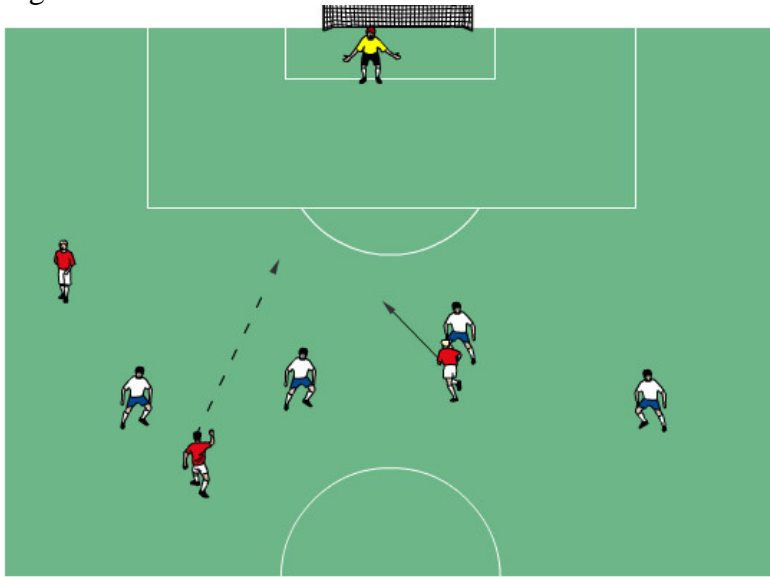
In Diagram 1, the Red player would be **on-side** since he/she is level with the second to last defender (the goalie being the last defender) when the ball is played. Even if Red is behind the second to last defender when he receives the ball he is still considered on-side since he was level when the ball was played!

Diagram 2:



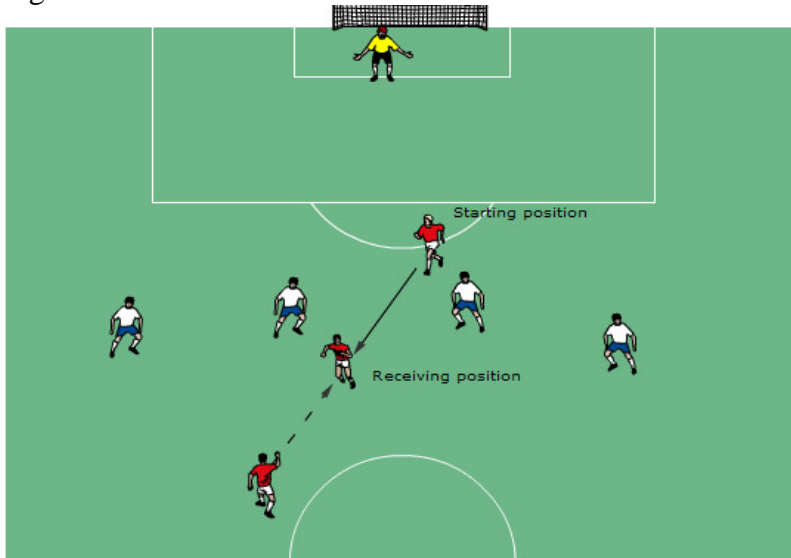
In Diagram 2, the red player would be ruled **off-side**. The red attacker is in advance of the second to last defender when the ball is played.

Diagram 3:



In Diagram 3, Is there a Red Player in an off-side position? Yes. Is the red team in violation of the off-sides law? No! Although the red left wing is in an off-side position, he/she is not violating the off-side rule since he/she is not interfering with the play or gaining an advantage by being “nearer to his/her opponents’ goal line than both the ball and the second to last opponent”.

Diagram 4:



In Diagram 4, Does Red receive the ball in an on-side position? Yes. Does Red violate the law of Off-sides? Yes! The red player should be ruled off-side since he/she was in an off-side position when the ball was played.

Note: Many skilled strikers will deliberately stand in an off-side position to stay out of the defenders sight and try to time their run into an on-side position just before the ball is played. Again, the key phrase is **“when the ball is played”**.

Diagram 5:

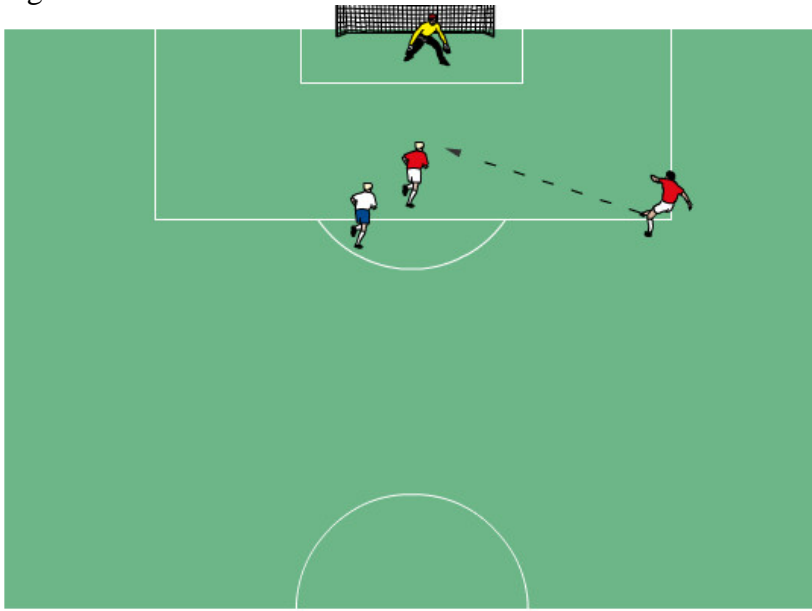
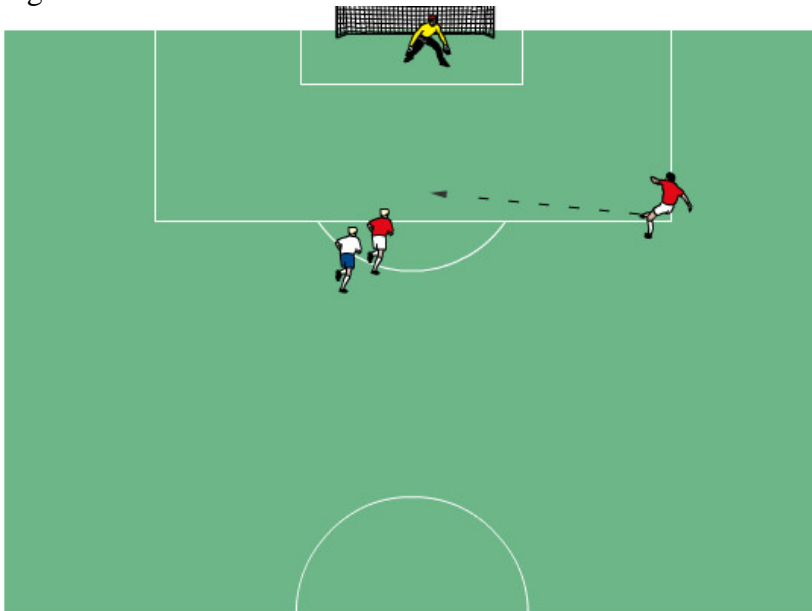
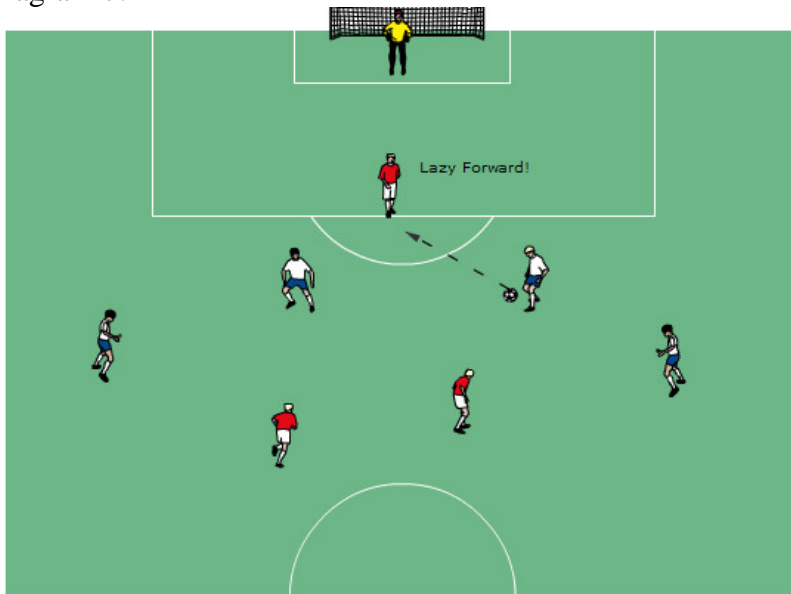


Diagram 6:



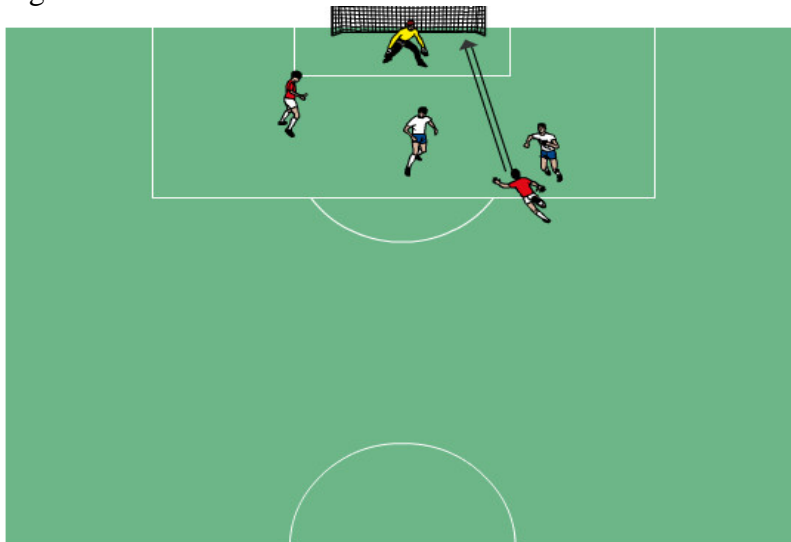
In Diagrams 5 and 6 a nearly identical situation unfolds. In both cases the player receiving the ball is nearer to his/her opponents' goal line than the second to last opponent. However, in Diagram 5 the player receiving the ball is off-side, while in Diagram 6 the attacker is on-side. Why? In Diagram 6 the player receiving the ball is behind the ball when it was played. **You cannot be in an off-side position if you are behind the ball at the moment it is played!** Although the difference of the attacking player receiving the ball in diagrams 5 & 6 is only a yard or two, that can be the difference between being off-side or on-side.

Diagram 7:



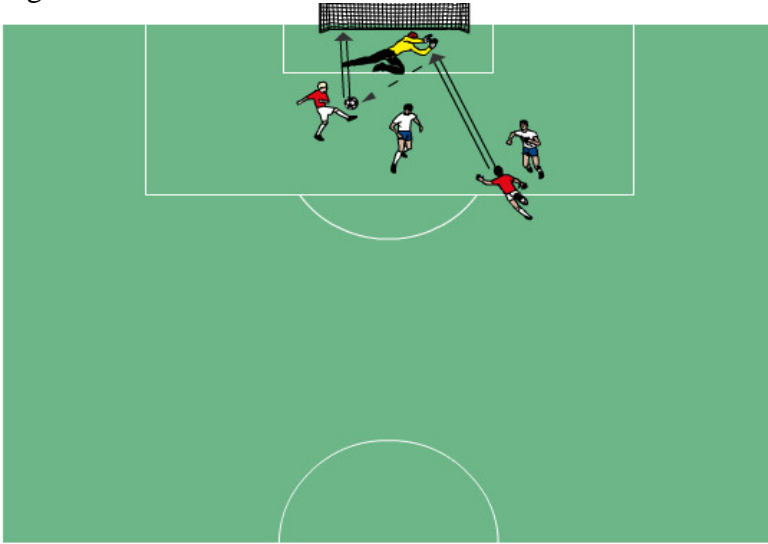
In Diagram 7, The red attacking player labeled the “lazy forward” is in an off-side position, receives the ball in an off-side position, but is not in violation of the off-side law. The reason being; A player in an off-side position is only penalized if, at the moment the ball touches or is **played by one of his team** he is, in the opinion of the referee, involved in active play.

Diagram 8:



In Diagram 8, There is a red attacker standing in an off-side position, but he/she is not in violation of the off-sides law. **Note:** this is open to a referee’s interpretation, but since the shot is taken directly, the player in the off-side position should be deemed “not interfering with the play”. In diagram 9, you’ll see how a player can go from not violating the off-side law to violating the law without changing his/her position.

Diagram 9:



In diagram 9, the red attacker goes from being in an off-side position to violating the off-side law. Once the goalkeeper gives up a rebound, the second red attacker goes from a passive off-side position to violating the off-side law due to the fact that his/her position “**gains an advantage**” by being positioned in such a manner.

In Conclusion: The off-side law is one of the most difficult rules to enforce for an official. With the law being open to interpretation and having many nuances, it leaves an officials’ decision open to debate. It’s important to understand that, whether a player is on-side or off-side can change in a matter of seconds. Games at the highest level are often decided by forwards timing their runs or defenders mistiming an “off-sides trap”. At the youth level, particularly with games officiated without assistant referee’s, coaches and parents would be better served by acknowledging that mistakes will be made and it makes no sense to shout out claims of “off-sides”. In many instances, these claims are incorrect and even when they are correct the officials’ decision is final. As a coach, I often have trouble acknowledging this to be so, but it remains to be the case!

I hope you find this article to be helpful in gaining a better understanding of FIFA Law 11: Offside.

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