
Rules Of Australian Rules Football

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Murray & Wood*

INTRODUCTION TO THE DYNAMIC SPORT OF AUSTRALIAN RULES FOOTBALL

Australian Rules Football, often called Aussie Rules, footy, or AFL (Australian Football League) after the premier professional competition, is a fast-paced, high-scoring, and physically demanding sport native to Australia. It is a unique blend of athleticism, strategy, and raw courage, combining elements of

Gaelic football, rugby, and soccer into a distinct spectacle. For the uninitiated, the game can appear chaotic, with players leaping high into the air, kicking the ball over long distances, and engaging in fierce physical contests. However, beneath the surface lies a structured and intricate set of **Rules Of Australian Rules Football** that govern every aspect of play, from the opening bounce to the final siren. Understanding these rules is essential not only for players but also for spectators who

wish to appreciate the tactical depth of this thrilling game. This guide will break down the core principles, scoring methods, player roles, and unique regulations that define how Australian Rules Football is played at all levels, from local parks to the grand stage of the AFL Grand Final. Whether you are a new fan or a seasoned follower looking to clarify a specific rule, this comprehensive overview will provide the clarity you need to fully enjoy the "greatest game of all."

THE ARENA: THE OVAL AND ITS DIMENSIONS

Before delving into the action, it is crucial to understand the stage upon which the game is played. Unlike the

fixed dimensions of a soccer or American football field, an Australian Rules Football field is not a standard size. The playing surface is an oval, typically a cricket ground that has been converted for the football season.

Field Size and Boundaries

The field can vary significantly in size, though it generally ranges from 135 to 185 meters in length and 110 to 155 meters in width. This variation in size can heavily influence the style of play, with smaller grounds favoring

congestion and defensive tactics, while larger grounds reward running and long kicking. The boundary line, often a painted white line or a physical fence, defines the playing area. If the ball or a player in possession of the ball crosses this line, the ball becomes "out of bounds," and a throw-in or a boundary kick is awarded to the opposing team. The goals are situated at each end of the oval, defining the scoring zone.

The Goal and Behind

Posts

At each end of the ground, there are four posts. The two taller, inner posts are the **goal posts**, and the two shorter, outer posts are the **behind posts**. The area between the goal posts is the goal line, extending up the posts to an unlimited height. The area between a goal post and a behind post is a behind line. The precise placement of the ball in relation to these posts is the central element of scoring in the **Rules Of Australian Rules Football**.

THE OBJECTIVE: HOW SCORING WORKS

The primary objective is simple: outscore the opposition. The team

with the most points at the end of four quarters wins the match. However, the scoring system has two distinct values that make the game unique.

The Goal (6 Points)

A **goal** is the most valuable score in the game, worth six points. To score a goal, a player must kick the ball through the two tall goal posts without it being touched by any other player, including the goal-kicker's own teammates or the opposition. The ball can travel on the full (in the air) or bounce through, but it cannot be touched by any player after the kick. If it is touched, even by a fingertip, it becomes a

behind (one point) instead. The kick must be a genuine kicking motion; the ball cannot be thrown or knocked through. The skill and precision required to kick a goal from a distance, under pressure, is one of the most celebrated aspects of the sport.

The Behind (1 Point)

A **behind** is scored when the ball passes between a goal post and a behind post, or if the ball hits a goal post (even if it then goes through the goal). A behind is also awarded if the ball is touched by any player (on any part of their body) before going through the goal

posts. A behind is worth one point. While a goal is the primary objective, accumulating behinds is crucial, as the total score is displayed as "Goals.Behinds Total Points" (e.g., 10.8.68). In a close game, a single behind can be the difference between victory and defeat.

TEAM STRUCTURE AND PLAYER POSITIONS

Each team fields 18 players on the ground at any one time, with an additional four players on the interchange bench who can be rotated on and off the field at any time (with no limit on the number of rotations in most professional leagues). The positions are fluid, but they are generally divided into three main lines plus a

"ruck."

The Forward Line

Forwards are the primary goal-scorers. Their primary job is to outmark (catch) the ball in the forward 50-meter arc and kick goals. Key positions include **Full Forward** (the main target), **Pocket Forwards** (flanking the full forward), and **Half-Forward Flanks** (who push up the ground to link play).

The Midfield

The **midfield** is the engine room of the team. These players

cover the most ground, linking defense and attack. They include **Ruckmen** (who contest the center bounce and other stoppages), **Ruck Rover, Rover**, and **Wingmen**. The midfield is crucial for winning possession and creating scoring opportunities. The **Ruckman** is often one of the tallest players on the field, tasked with tapping the ball to a smaller, quicker teammate.

The Defense Line

The **defenders** are responsible for preventing the opposition from scoring. Their positions

mirror the forwards, including **Full Back** (the last line of defense), **Pocket Backs**, and **Half-Back Flanks**. A key defensive skill is the "spoiling" or punching the ball away from an opponent who is about to take a mark.

THE CORE MECHANICS OF PLAY

The game flows through a series of unique actions and stoppages, governed by specific rules.

The Bounce Down

and Ball-Ups

Play begins and restarts after a goal with a **center bounce**. The umpire bounces the ball in the center of the ground, and the two opposing ruckmen leap and compete to tap the ball to their teammates. After a behind, play restarts with a **kick-in** from the full-back line. At other stoppages (e.g., when the ball is locked in a contest), the umpire holds a **ball-up**, throwing the ball vertically into the air for a ruck contest.

The Mark

The **mark** is arguably the most iconic rule in Australian Rules Football. A player is

awarded a mark if they catch a ball that has been kicked more than 15 meters (from the kicker's foot) without it touching the ground or being touched by another player. Upon taking a mark, the player is entitled to an unimpeded kick from the exact spot where the mark was taken. This rule is a fundamental advantage for tall, athletic players who can leap high to intercept a ball. A player who takes a mark cannot be tackled, allowing them to play on by kicking or handballing the ball, or they can "play on" by running off the spot.

Kicking

and

Handballing

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Players advance the ball using two primary methods:

- **Kicking:** The ball can be kicked in any direction, and it is the most effective way to move the ball long distances. A drop punt (end-over-end spiral) is the most common and accurate technique.
- **Handballing:** This is not a punch in the traditional sense. The player must hold the ball in one hand and punch it with the

clenched fist of the other hand.

The ball is propelled off the open palm.

Handballing is used for short, quick passes to a teammate under pressure.

The Tackle and Holding the Ball

Tackling is a legal and fundamental part of the game. A player must be tackled below the shoulders and above the knees. A crucial rule concerning the tackle is the "**Holding the Ball**"

rule. If a player is in possession of the ball and is tackled correctly, they must attempt to dispose of the ball (by kicking or handballing) immediately. If they fail to do so, or if they are tackled while not attempting to dispose of the ball, a free kick is awarded to the tackler. This rule creates immense pressure and forces players to make quick decisions.

FOULS, INFRINGEMENTS, AND FREE KICKS

The umpire enforces the rules by awarding free kicks (set kicks from the spot of the infringement) or 50-meter penalties (moving the ball 50 meters forward, usually for dissent or time-wasting). Key

infringements include:

- **Holding the Man:** Tackling a player who is not in possession of the ball.
- **High Contact:** Making contact above the shoulders of an opponent (e.g., a high tackle).
- **Blocking (Shepherding):** A player can only block an opponent if the ball is within five meters. Running interference without being near the ball is illegal.
- **Kicking in Danger:** Attempting to kick the ball when an opponent is on the ground or in a vulnerable position.

- **Tripping:** Deliberately tripping an opponent.
- **Deliberate Out of Bounds:** If a player intentionally kicks or handballs the ball out of bounds without any pressure, a free kick is awarded to the opposition (resulting in a boundary throw-in in some leagues, but a free kick in others).

THE FLOW OF THE GAME: QUARTERS AND TIME

An Australian Rules Football match is divided into four quarters. In professional football (AFL), each quarter is

20 minutes of playing time, plus time-on for stoppages (goals, injuries, the ball going out of bounds). This means a quarter can often last for 27-32 minutes in real-time. There are breaks between quarters: a six-minute break after the first quarter, a 20-minute half-time break, and a six-minute break after the third quarter. The clock stops when the umpire calls time off for a goal, a behind, a boundary throw-in, or an injury. The siren sounds at the end of each quarter, and the ball is dead immediately upon the siren.

UNIQUE AND ADVANCED RULES

Beyond the basics, several advanced rules shape the modern game.

The Interchange and the "Sub" Rule

Teams have a bench of interchange players. There is no limit on the number of rotations per game in the AFL, though this has been experimented with to reduce congestion. In addition to the bench, there is often a **medical substitute** or an **emergency player** who can be activated to replace an injured player during a match.

The "Third Man Up" Rule

To reduce the risk of injury and encourage one-on-one ruck contests, the rules now prohibit a player from "third-manning" into a ruck contest (e.g., a midfielder coming in to help the ruckman tap the ball). Only the two nominated ruckmen can contest the bounce-down or ball-up.

The "Stand"

Rule

To speed up the game, the "stand" rule was introduced. When a player takes a mark or receives a free kick, the umpire will call "stand" to the defender who is marking the ball. That defender must stand perfectly still at the spot they

were when the mark was taken, until the player with the ball kicks, handballs, or plays on. This gives the attacking player more time and space to dispose of the ball.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING THE COMPLEXITY OF THE GAME

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