

CHANGES TO LAWS & INTERPRETATIONS

AFL NSW/ACT
DECEMBER 2025



SUMMARY OF NATIONAL CHANGES (AS APPROVED BY THE AFL COMMISSION)

The AFL has confirmed that the following changes will take effect nationally for the 2026 season:

- Removal of the requirement for a player to start in the goal square at each centre ball-up.
- Introduction of a free kick for *Last Disposal Out of Bounds* between the 50m arcs.
- At all centre ball-ups, a competing ruck cannot cross the centre-circle line and engage prior to contesting the football.
- Around the ground, umpires may restart play without a nominated ruck being present.
- A shrug in a tackle will be deemed prior opportunity (as it constitutes an attempt to evade or fend).
- A player must stand if they are within the protected area when a mark or free kick is awarded.
- Alignment of “reasonable time” for kick-ins and set shots around the ground (both now eight seconds).

These changes sit in addition to previously confirmed adjustments relating to:

- removal of the centre bounce

AFL NSW/ACT COMPETITION APPLICATION 2026 SEASON

AFL NSW/ACT has reviewed the changes in detail and confirms the implementation approach for all AFL-managed competitions across NSW/ACT for the 2026 season.

The following provides a summary of the national changes and outlines which will apply across our Senior, Youth, Junior and Masters competitions.

A full breakdown, including examples and scenarios, can be found in appendix one on Page 11 of this presentation.

A video showing examples of the changes can be found at:

<https://www.afl.com.au/news/1447460/seven-rules-changes-afl-to-crack-down-on-dead-time-in-games-in-2026>

1) STARTING POSITION NO PLAYER REQUIRED IN THE GOAL SQUARE

Implemented in all AFL-managed Senior competitions.

N/A for all junior, youth and masters competitions.

2) LAST DISPOSAL – BETWEEN THE 50M ARCS

Implemented in all AFL-managed Senior competitions. N/A Junior U8–U12 competitions, where the existing last-disposal rule interpretation already applies.

Key clarifications from AFL NSW/ACT:

- Insufficient intent can still be paid inside the arcs (in competitions where it is applicable)
- Boundary line rulings at the intersection of the 50m arc will default to the last disposal interpretation.
- Where a player shepherds the ball out to gain a free kick, umpires may call for a throw-in (SANFL interpretation). In matches without boundary umpires, the umpires may call for a ball-up 10-15 metres inside the boundary.

3) CENTRE BALL-UP – RUCK RESTRICTIONS

Applicable for all Senior, Youth and Masters competitions.

Not applicable for Junior age groups that do not utilise traditional starting positions.

4) RUCK NOMINATIONS – AROUND THE GROUND

Implemented in all AFL-managed Senior competitions.

N/A for all junior, youth and masters competitions.

Umpires will:

- request ruck nominations twice only,
- restart play immediately after the second request,
- call “no rucks” where required, with the ball thrown up immediately.

5) SHRUG IN A TACKLE – PRIOR OPPORTUNITY

Implemented in all AFL-managed Senior competitions.

N/A for all junior, youth and masters competitions.

Key clarifications from AFL NSW/ACT:

- A legal tackle is still required.
- If initial contact is directly to the head, it remains high regardless of a shrug.

6) STAND RULE – PROTECTED AREA

Implemented in all AFL-managed Senior competitions.

N/A for all junior, youth and masters competitions.

Key clarifications from AFL NSW/ACT:

- Only one player must stand if multiple are inside the protected area.
- Players inside the protected area must stand even if the ball spills from the initial mark or free.
- For downfield free kicks, the player inside the protected area at the new mark must stand.
- Once set, the player on the mark **cannot be replaced**.

7) REASONABLE TIME ALIGNMENT – EIGHT SECONDS

Implemented in all AFL-managed Senior competitions.

N/A for all junior, youth and masters competitions.

In 2025 umpires allowed 'reasonable time' for a kick-in, which is deemed at around 12 seconds.

However, 'reasonable time' for a mark or free kick paid around the ground is deemed at eight seconds.

From 2026 onwards, both of these will align to be eight seconds.

Details of Change	Law or Interpretation	Junior Football (U8-U12)	Youth Football (U13-U17)	Senior Football (18+)	Masters Football (35+)
Remove the requirement for a Player to start in the Goal Square at each centre ball-up as part of traditional starting positions (6-6-6)	Law of the Game	NA	NA	✓	NA
The commence of a quarter, or recommencement of a match following a goal will be via a throw up. The Bounce will no longer be used as method to commence of recommence a match.	Law of the Game	✓	✓	✓	✓
Introduction of a Free Kick for the last disposal Out of Bounds in between the 50m arcs. The interpretation will resemble the SANFL law, which relates to reasonable efforts to keep the ball in play.	Interpretation	NA	✓	✓	?
At all centre ball-ups, the competing Rucks cannot cross the Centre Circle line and engage with the opposing Ruck , prior to contesting the football	Interpretation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Around the ground, the Umpire may restart play without a nominated Ruck being present. Noting only a nominated Ruck can compete in the Ruck contest.	Interpretation	?	?	✓	✓
A shrug (in a tackle) will be deemed Prior Opportunity (i.e., as an attempt to evade or fend an opponent).	Interpretation	?	?	✓	?
A Player on the mark must stand if they are within the Protected Area (i.e., within five metres) when a Mark or Free Kick occurs. They can no longer back outside 5 metres and will be called to stand by the umpire.	Interpretation	NA	NA	✓	NA
Align the interpretation of 'reasonable time' for a Player to bring the football back into play from a Behind being scored and the time allowed for a set Kick around the ground. Currently, reasonable time for kick-ins is 12 seconds , whereas around the ground is eight (8) seconds . Players will now be allowed eight (8) seconds in both instances.	Interpretation	?	?	✓	?

ⓧ Denotes the new Law or interpretation change will not be implemented

NA Denotes the new Law or interpretation change is not applicable

✓ Denotes a new Law or interpretation change in the applicable competitions will be implemented in 2026

Note: The league will release a memo outlining the above in detail, including vision examples and scenarios for each change.

Note: Specific umpire training and education will be rolled out (league and club umpires)

Additional Information – Law of the Game and Interpretation Changes

Last Disposal Out of Bounds

- ⌚ Insufficient intent can still be paid between the arcs.
- ⌚ If the ball crosses the intersection of the 50m Line and the boundary line, it will be adjudicated as last disposal. (i.e., ball crosses on the 50m line, it will be paid as a last disposal).
- ⌚ If a player does not make a play on the ball, and shepherds the ball out of bounds to receive the free kick, the umpire may call for the ball to be thrown in (SANFL interpretation)

Centre Ball Up Ruck Contests

- ⌚ At centre ball-ups, a competing ruck cannot cross the centre circle line and engage with the opposition ruck prior to contesting the football.
- ⌚ If in the act of competing for the ball, the rucks cross the line and engage, play on will be called.

Ruck Nominations Around the Group

- ⌚ Once the umpires have ruck nominations, they will immediately throw the ball up or direct boundary umpires to throw the ball in. This is regardless of how far away the rucks are. If they don't make the contest in time, no other player can touch the ball until it has hit the ground.
- ⌚ Umpires will ask twice for nominations and if none are received after the second ask, the umpires will clearly indicate "no rucks", and they will throw the ball up or direct the boundary umpires to throw the ball in.
- ⌚ If a nomination is received from one team, the umpires will ask the other team one more time. Should no nomination be received, the umpires will clearly indicate "No ruck (team)", and the ball will be thrown up or directed to be thrown in.

Additional Information – Law of the Game and Interpretation Changes

Shrug in a Tackle – Prior Opportunity

- ⌚ Where a player shrugs and draws high contact, it will be deemed prior opportunity. The tackle must still be legal to result in holding the ball. Where a player shrugs and then legally disposes of the ball, play on will be called.
- ⌚ Where initial contact occurs directly to the head (even if a player shrugs) it will be adjudicated as high contact.

Stand Rule – Protected Area

- ⌚ When a player is inside the protected area when a mark is taken or a free kick is paid, they must stand.
- ⌚ Where there is more than one player in the protected area when a mark is taken or a free kick is paid, only one player must stand. As per 2025, the umpires will direct a player to stand, that player must stand, and all other players must immediately leave the protected area.
- ⌚ Last Disposal, Insufficient Intent and Out on the Full kicks (where a player is in the protected area when the ball crosses the line) will need to stand the mark. If they are not within the protected area, they will be allowed to remain outside 5.
- ⌚ If the ball goes out of bounds on the full next to the behind post, or insufficient intent is paid, and a player is inside the protected area, they must come back to the 9m line and stand.
- ⌚ If a mark is taken or a free kick is paid inside the 9m, and a player is inside the protected area, they must come back to the 9m line and stand.
- ⌚ If a player is within the protected area when a mark is taken or a free kick is paid, and the ball spills away, they still must stand the mark if called to do so by the umpire.
- ⌚ For downfield free kicks, if a player is within the protected area of where the mark will be set, they will be required to stand.
- ⌚ Once a player is set on the mark and standing, you cannot replace that player with someone else.
- ⌚ Anytime a player is directed to stand by the umpire, they must stand.

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