

# Ask a Soccer Referee

Answers to Laws of the Game  
and Practical Refereeing Questions:  
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As of 2/23/2000, all replies to technical questions posted in this column will have been coordinated with and approved by  
the U.S. Soccer Federation's National Program for Referee Development

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## DISTRACTIONS AND MAKING THE OFFSIDE DECISION

Your question:

I will be refereeing this summer and have a question on rules interpretation, i.e. offside.

From David Ager's book, "The Soccer Referee's Manual", he states that "Offside can only be given when the ball is released." However, the rule says "... at the moment the ball touches or is played by one of his team". This implies that the ball does not have to be passed, but only touched or played by a teammate.

Here is the situation: Player B is in an offside position and is definitely close enough to distract or require attention by the goalie or other defenders. Player A, a teammate, dribbles the ball by himself past the defense and scores unassisted.

I believe offside should be called on player B, because I do not read the requirement for a "release" as part of the rules. Player B was in the play and a distraction to the goalie and defense. Ager, writes "if the attacking player retains control of the ball when dribbling past a defender, it would be wrong to give offside because the ball has not been released." (page 53, bottom) This is not an uncommon situation, especially in youth soccer.

Please, advise or send me to an appropriate authority if you could. Thanks!

### **USSF answer (February 28, 2002):**

Your question is a good one and, while Mr. Ager's statement is correct, as is your citation from the Law, you are confusing apples and applesauce.

Mr. Ager's statement refers to the referee's act in actually calling the offside infringement. The citation from the Law refers to determining the offside position of a player. Being in an offside position is the first condition that must be met prior to being declared offside, which involves a good deal more than simply position. The final requirement is involvement in play, which means that the player must be interfering with play, interfering with an opponent, or gaining an advantage from being in the offside position. If none of these conditions is met, then a player may remain in an offside position for nearly the entire game without being punished for it, no matter how many times his teammates play, touch, or otherwise make contact with the ball.

Please remember that "interfering with play" or "interfering with an opponent" does NOT include being a distraction -- unless the player in the offside position actually does something which is distracting. "Distraction" is a common goalkeeper defense when he has just been scored against -- but goalkeepers are trained to keep their eyes on the ball, not on an opponent. In fact, an opponent in an offside position is one of the LAST things a goalkeeper needs to worry about because that player cannot become involved in play. Just as mere presence does not constitute an offside violation, so also mere presence is not a distraction, so this defensive excuse is simply that, an excuse, rather than a fact in Law. Of course, players can make mistakes and allow themselves to become distracted, but this is a player error which neither the Laws of the Game nor the referee can correct.

Mr. Ager's book is a useful document, but may I suggest that you consider acquiring a USSF publication that is somewhat more comprehensive, "Advice to Referees on the Laws of the Game." It is not a "how-to" book, like "The Soccer Referee's Manual," but it does give you tips on what should be done in particular situations. The book may be purchased from the USSF Referee Department for \$4.95 plus s/h, or you can download it from the US Soccer website.