

Change to Law 12

Goalkeepers controlling the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s)

Background and Q+A

V1.0 – 03/2025

Background

The section of Law 12 requiring the referee to award an indirect free kick if the goalkeeper controlled the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s) for more than six seconds was rarely being enforced, primarily because managing an indirect free kick in the penalty area is difficult and takes a lot of time. This led to goalkeepers ignoring the Law and holding the ball for long periods, mainly to waste time and slow down the tempo of the match when it was advantageous to do so for their team.

At its 139th Annual General Meeting in March 2025, after being presented with compelling evidence from trials involving hundreds of matches, the The IFAB decided that goalkeepers would be allowed to hold the ball for an extra two seconds but that the new eight-second time limit must be strictly enforced, with the referee visually counting down the last five seconds with a raised hand. If a goalkeeper holds the ball for more than eight seconds, the referee will now award a corner kick to the opposition.

More details about this Law change and how it will be applied are provided in the below Q&A.

Q+A

1. Why did the Law need to change?

Referees were not enforcing the Law, and goalkeepers were holding the ball for much longer than six seconds to waste time and change the tempo of the match, especially when their team were winning. This led to frustration amongst players, coaches and fans.

2. Why were referees not enforcing the Law?

Referees were seldom penalising goalkeepers for holding the ball for longer than six seconds, mainly because managing an indirect free kick in the penalty area is very difficult and usually disrupts the rhythm of the game more than the goalkeeper does by holding the ball for too long.

Moreover, conceding an indirect free kick in the penalty area is a severe punishment, as it provides the opposition with a very good opportunity to score. The old Law was perceived as unfair and at odds with the corresponding offence, as the attacking team does not have possession or any chance of winning it when the ball is being held by the goalkeeper.

3. Why has the punishment changed from an indirect free kick to a corner kick?

The IFAB sought an effective deterrent and a restart that would be easy for referees to manage. Corner kicks were chosen because goalkeepers will not want to concede them and because they are easy to manage and can be set up much more quickly than an indirect free kick in the penalty area.

4. Why has the time that goalkeepers can hold the ball been extended from six to eight seconds?

Analysis showed that, except where goalkeepers wanted to waste time or slow down the tempo of the game, they usually released the ball within eight seconds of gaining clear control of it.

The initial analysis and trial results revealed three main time frames for goalkeepers releasing the ball:

- 1-4 seconds: the goalkeeper wants to start a quick counter-attack*
- 5-8 seconds: the goalkeeper wants to release the ball quickly but cannot find an available team-mate or another player is in their way (usually accidentally), e.g. crowded penalty area after an attacking free kick or corner kick
- Over 8 seconds**: the goalkeeper is deliberately wasting time and/or trying to slow down the tempo of the game

**During the trials in Italy, the goalkeeper released the ball within four seconds 61% of the time.*

***In some cases, this involves the goalkeeper holding the ball for more than 20 seconds.*

5. Some trials used a throw-in whilst others used a corner kick. Why did The IFAB choose the corner kick as the punishment for a goalkeeper who holds the ball for too long?

The IFAB decided that a corner kick was a more suitable punishment because it was perceived by those involved in the trials as being a stronger deterrent than a throw-in.

6. When is the goalkeeper considered to be in control of the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s)?

According to Law 12, a goalkeeper is considered to be in control of the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s) when:

- the ball is between their hands/arms
- the ball is between their hand(s)/arm(s) and any surface (e.g. ground, own body)
- they are holding the ball in their outstretched open hand(s)
- they are bouncing it on the ground or throwing it in the air

7. When does the eight-second count start?

The eight seconds start when the referee is satisfied that the goalkeeper has clear control of the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s). The goalkeeper does not need to be standing up for the countdown to start, especially because in many examples of time-wasting the goalkeeper catches the ball, falls unnecessarily to the ground and then stays there for some time even though no one is preventing them from standing up.

If an opponent prevents the goalkeeper from releasing the ball within the eight seconds, a free kick is awarded to the goalkeeper's team unless the advantage can be played.

8. Why does the referee raise their hand for the last five seconds of the eight-second countdown?

The referee will raise a hand and use their fingers to count down from five to zero to help the goalkeeper avoid being penalised. The countdown is also useful for the goalkeeper's team-mates to make themselves available to receive the ball from the goalkeeper before the countdown ends.

9. Which side is the corner kick taken from?

The corner kick is taken from the side closest to where the goalkeeper was standing when they were penalised by the referee.

10. Where did the trials take place?

Trials were held in more than 400 competitive matches in England, Italy and Malta. Independent (referee) observers timed how long the goalkeepers held the ball.

11. How many times were goalkeepers penalised during the trials?

- Across 179 matches in Malta, no goalkeeper held the ball for more than eight seconds.
- Across 160 matches in England and 80 matches in Italy, there were only five cases (across four matches) in which a goalkeeper held the ball for more than eight seconds, always towards the end of the match.

12. What feedback was received from the trial participants?

Surveys were completed by coaches, goalkeepers and referees, and the results were very positive, although some goalkeepers were understandably less enthusiastic than the other stakeholders:

- 63.7% said the change had a positive impact on the game
- 72.5% said the game was faster as a result of the change
- 87.6% said the five-second countdown by the referee was helpful

13. The IFAB's trials usually last two years – why was this one shorter?

With only five offences in over 400 matches and given the positive feedback received from the trial participants, The IFAB did not see a reason to delay introducing the change into the Laws, especially given the benefit to all levels of the game.

Wording of the new Law

Law 12 – Fouls and Misconduct

3. Corner kick

A corner kick is awarded if a goalkeeper, inside their penalty area, controls the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s) for more than eight seconds before releasing it. A goalkeeper is considered to be in control of the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s) when:

- the ball is between their hands/arms or between their hand(s)/arm(s) and any surface (e.g. ground, own body)
- holding the ball in their outstretched open hand(s)
- bouncing it on the ground or throwing it in the air

The referee will decide when the goalkeeper has control of the ball and the eight seconds begin and will visually count down the last five seconds with a raised hand.

A goalkeeper cannot be challenged by an opponent when in control of the ball with their hand(s)/arm(s).
