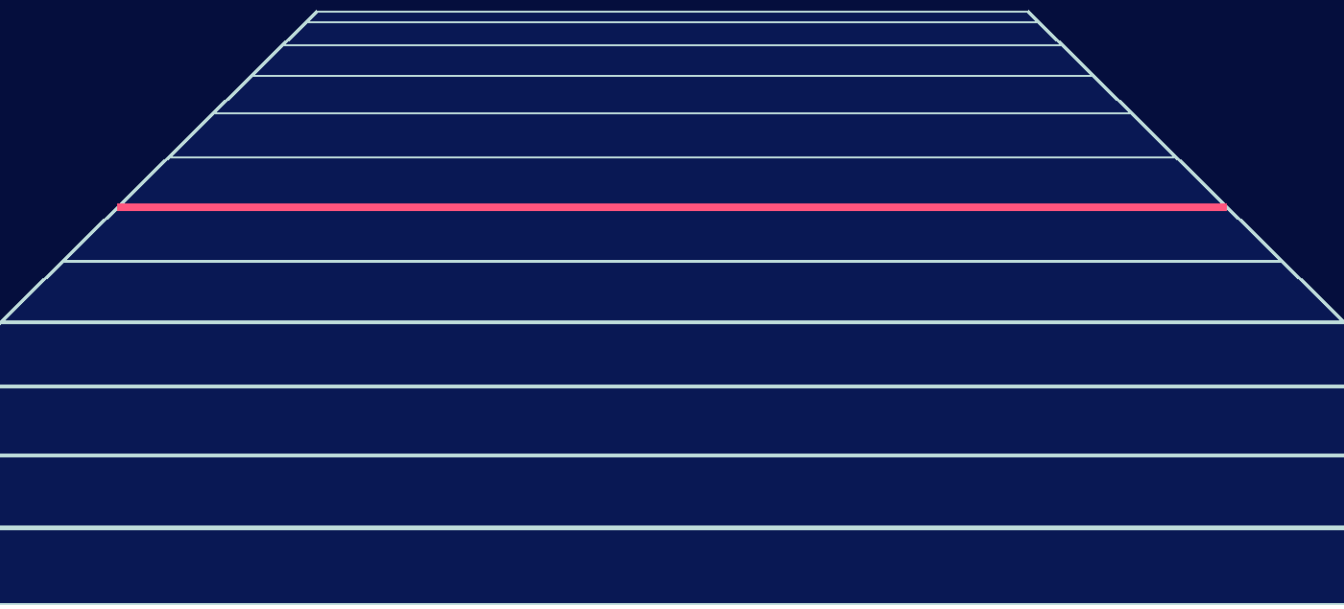
A FRIENDLY FIRST GUIDE

The Girls' Guide to NFL Football

Rules, plays, teams and game-day talk, explained the way a friend would.

RACHEL NEVERS



WELCOME

Football, in plain English

Football has a reputation for being complicated. Once someone walks you through it, it isn't. This guide is that walk-through.

It is for anyone who has watched a game and wondered why the whole room just cheered, why the clock keeps stopping, or what "2nd and 8" means. No jargon without an explanation, and no question too basic.

Read it front to back, or skip to what you need. Chapter 6 shows you how to watch a game, and the last page is a cheat sheet to keep on your phone for game day.

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CHAPTER 1

How a Game Works

Two teams, one ball, sixty minutes. Everything else is detail, and the details are easier than they look.

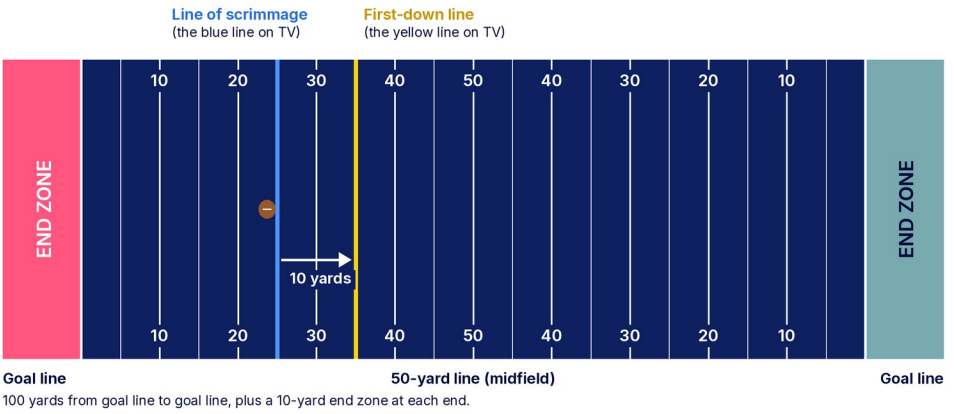
The big idea

Each team has **11 players** on the field. The team with the ball is the **offence**. It moves the ball toward the other team's end zone by running with it or throwing it. The other team is the **defence**, and its job is to stop that from happening.

Whoever has more points when the clock runs out wins. Hold on to that sentence and the rest of this guide falls into place.

The field

An NFL field is **100 yards** from one goal line to the other, with a **10-yard end zone** at each end. Each team defends one end zone and attacks the other. The lines across the field mark every five yards, with numbers every ten, counting up to the **50-yard line** at midfield and back down again.



The field, with the two lines you see painted on your TV screen.

On your TV screen

The **blue line** shows where the play starts (the line of scrimmage). The **yellow line** shows where the offence needs to get for a first down. Neither line is painted on the real grass. Once you know that, half the mystery is gone.

The clock

- A game is **four quarters of 15 minutes**, so 60 minutes of game time. Halftime lasts 13 minutes.
- The clock stops often: after an incomplete pass, after a score, for timeouts and penalties, and when a player with the ball steps out of bounds (near the end of each half, that stop matters most). That is why a 60-minute game fills an afternoon.
- Each team gets **three timeouts per half**.
- The **two-minute warning** is an automatic timeout when two minutes remain in each half. Expect the tension to rise right after it.
- Between plays, the offence has **40 seconds** on the play clock to start the next play (25 seconds after certain stoppages).

Kickoff: how every half starts

Before the game, captains meet at midfield for the **coin toss**. One team kicks the ball deep to the other to start the game. Kickoffs also start the second half and follow every touchdown and field goal.

The receiving team catches the kick and runs it back as far as it can. If the kick lands in the end zone and the returner stays put, it is a **touchback**, and the offence starts at its own **35-yard line** (2026 rules).

Downs: what “1st and 10” means

This is the one idea that unlocks the whole game. The offence gets **four plays, called downs, to move the ball 10 yards**. Gain those 10 yards and the count resets: a brand-new set of four downs. That reset is called a **first down**.

You hear	It means
1st and 10	First play of a new set. 10 yards to go.
2nd and 7	Second play. The last play gained 3 yards, so 7 yards to go.
3rd and 1	Third play, just 1 yard to go. A big moment.
4th and 2	Last chance. The team chooses: punt, kick a field goal, or “go for it.”
1st and goal	The ball is within 10 yards of the end zone, so the only target left is the goal line.

If the offence uses all four downs without reaching the line, the other team takes over right there. That is a **turnover on downs**, and it is why most teams punt the ball away on fourth down instead of risking it.

How scoring works

Score	Points	How it happens
Touchdown	6	Carry the ball into the end zone, or catch a pass there.
Extra point	1	Right after a touchdown, a kick through the goalposts from the 15-yard line.
Two-point conversion	2	Instead of the kick, run or pass the ball into the end zone from the 2-yard line.
Field goal	3	Kick the ball through the goalposts on any down, usually fourth.
Safety	2	The defence tackles the ball carrier in his own end zone. The team that gave up the safety then kicks the ball away.

Quick math for the scoreboard

7 = touchdown + extra point. **8** = touchdown + two-point conversion. **3** = field goal.

So a 17–14 game is two touchdowns and a field goal against two touchdowns. Scores start to read like stories.

Overtime

Tied after four quarters? In the regular season there is **one 10-minute overtime period**. Both teams get the ball at least once (unless the first team gives up a safety); after that, the next score wins. Still tied when it ends, and the game goes in the books as a **tie**.

In the playoffs there are no ties. Teams play 15-minute overtime periods until someone wins.

CHAPTER 2

Who's on the Field

Eleven players a side, and each one has a clear job. Learn the jobs and the whole picture comes into focus.

A team has three units: **offence** (has the ball), **defence** (stops the ball) and **special teams** (on the field for kicks). Players swap in and out freely between plays, so you see different groups for different situations.

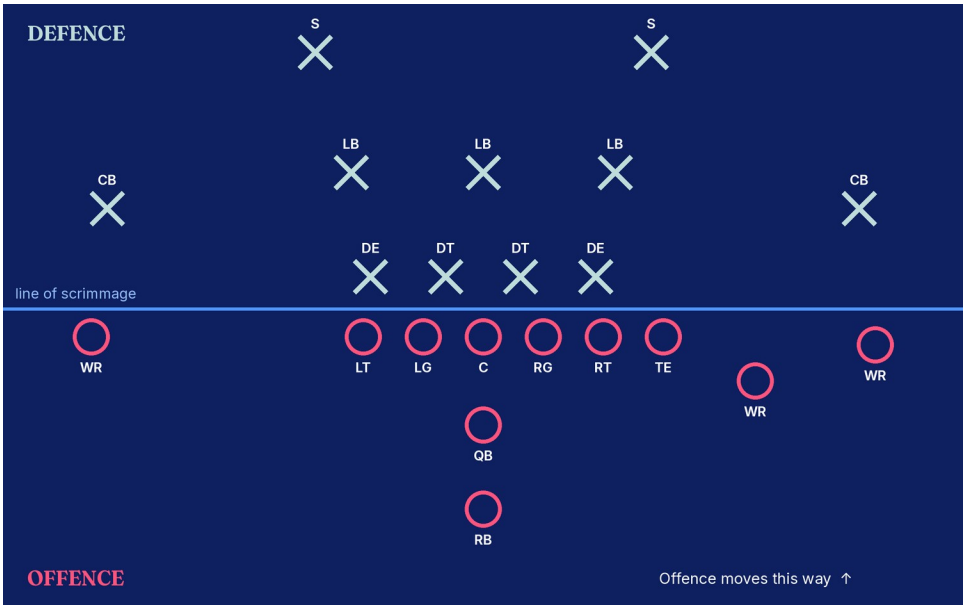
Offence: the team with the ball

Position	What they do
Quarterback (QB)	The leader of the offence. Takes the snap, then hands the ball off, runs with it or throws it. The most-watched player on the field.
Running back (RB)	Lines up behind the quarterback. Carries the ball on running plays, catches short passes and helps block.
Wide receiver (WR)	Lines up wide, near the sideline. Fast, runs set paths called routes and catches passes.
Tight end (TE)	Half blocker, half receiver. Lines up at the end of the offensive line.
Offensive line (OL)	Five big blockers: a centre, two guards and two tackles. The centre snaps the ball. Together they protect the quarterback and open running lanes.

Defence: the team stopping the ball

Position	What they do
Defensive line (DL)	Ends and tackles who line up face to face with the offensive line. They push into the backfield to stop runs and pressure the quarterback.
Linebacker (LB)	The second layer. They tackle runners, cover short passes and sometimes rush the quarterback.
Cornerback (CB)	Cover the wide receivers, step for step, and break up passes.
Safety (S)	The last line of defence, lined up deep. They help on long passes and stop long runs. Cornerbacks and safeties together are the "secondary."

How they line up



Offence in coral circles, defence in seaglass Xs.

Special teams: the kicking game

Position	What they do
Kicker (K)	Kicks off, kicks field goals and kicks extra points.
Punter (P)	Punts the ball away on fourth down to push the other team back.
The rest of the unit	A long snapper, a holder for kicks, returners who catch kicks and punts, and coverage players who race downfield to tackle.

> **Watch tip**
> Before the snap, count the players spread wide near the sidelines. Lots of receivers out wide hints at a pass. A tight bunch with extra blockers hints at a run.

CHAPTER 3

Common Plays, Decoded

Most plays come in a handful of flavours. Learn to spot them and the game starts to feel like a conversation.

On offence

Play	What happens
Run play	The quarterback hands the ball to the running back, who runs. Spot it: a handoff and a pile of bodies at the line.
Pass play	The quarterback drops back and throws. A catch is a **completion**; a ball that hits the ground is **incomplete**, and the clock stops.
Play-action	The quarterback fakes a handoff, then throws. The fake freezes the defence for a split second, and that second matters.
Screen pass	The offence lets pass rushers through on purpose, then the quarterback flips a short pass to a player waiting behind a wall of blockers.
Draw play	Looks like a pass at first, then turns into a handoff once the defence drops back.
Quarterback sneak	The quarterback pushes straight ahead behind the centre. Used when a team needs a yard or less.
Scramble	The planned play breaks down and the quarterback runs on his own to escape pressure.
Hail Mary	A long, high throw into the end zone in the final seconds of a half. A crowd of players jumps for one ball.
Spike	Right after the snap, the quarterback throws the ball into the ground to stop the clock. A clock trick, not a mistake.
Kneel-down	The quarterback takes the snap and kneels. The clock keeps running. Teams do this when they are ahead and want the game to end.

On defence

Play	What happens
Blitz	Extra defenders (linebackers or defensive backs) rush the quarterback. High risk, high reward.
Sack	The quarterback is tackled behind the line before he throws. A big win for the defence.
Interception	A defender catches a pass meant for the offence. The defence takes over.
Fumble	The ball carrier drops the ball. Either team can recover it.
Man vs. zone	In man coverage, each defender follows one player. In zone coverage, each defender guards an area of the field.

Interceptions and lost fumbles are both **turnovers**. Turnovers swing games, which is why the crowd reacts so loudly.

On special teams

Play	What happens
Punt	On fourth down, the punter kicks the ball far downfield so the other team starts further from a score.
Fair catch	The returner waves one arm above his head before catching a punt. He cannot be hit, and he cannot run with the ball.
Field goal	A kick through the goalposts for 3 points.
Onside kick	A short kickoff the kicking team aims to recover itself, to get the ball right back. Under 2026 rules, a team can declare an onside kick at any time in the game, and it tells the referee first, so nobody is surprised.
Fake punt or fake field goal	The kicking unit lines up to kick, then runs or throws instead. Rare, bold and loud when it works.

CHAPTER 4

Penalties You'll Hear

A yellow flag on the grass means someone broke a rule. Here are the ones you will hear every week.

When an official sees a foul, a **yellow flag** hits the grass. After the play, the referee announces the penalty over the stadium microphone and gives a hand signal. Penalties cost yards, usually **5, 10 or 15**, and some also hand the offence an automatic first down. A team can **decline** a penalty if the result of the play is better for it.

A **red flag** is different: that is a head coach challenging a call, asking for a video review.

Penalty	What happened	Cost	Ref signal
False start	An offensive player moves before the snap.	5 yards	Forearms rolled over and over in front of the body.
Offside / encroachment	A defender crosses the line before the snap.	5 yards	Hands on hips.
Delay of game	The play clock hits zero before the snap.	5 yards	Arms folded across the chest.
Too many men on the field	A team has 12 players out there.	5 yards	Both hands on top of the head.
Offensive holding	A blocker grabs and restrains a defender.	10 yards	Grasping one wrist, fist clenched, in front of the chest.
Defensive holding	A defender grabs a receiver or blocker.	5 yards + automatic first down	Same holding signal.
Defensive pass interference	A defender illegally blocks a receiver's chance to catch the ball while it is in the air.	Ball placed at the spot of the foul + first down (can be huge)	Hands open, pushed forward from the shoulders.
Offensive pass interference	A receiver pushes off or blocks a defender while the ball is in the air.	10 yards	Same pass interference signal.

Penalty	What happened	Cost	Ref signal
Roughing the passer	An illegal hit on the quarterback, such as a late hit after the throw.	15 yards + automatic first down	Personal foul signal, then a raised arm swung forward.
Face mask	Grabbing and twisting or pulling an opponent's face mask.	15 yards	Grasping motion with one hand near the face.
Unnecessary roughness	A hit beyond what the play needs, often after the whistle.	15 yards	One wrist striking the other above the head (the personal foul signal).
Intentional grounding	The quarterback throws the ball away to avoid a sack with no receiver nearby.	Loss of down + 10 yards (or the spot of the throw)	Arms waved together diagonally across the body.
Unsportsmanlike conduct	Taunting, excessive celebrating or abusive language.	15 yards	Arms outstretched, palms down.

Signals you'll see on almost every play

Touchdown, field goal or good extra point: both arms straight up.

First down: one arm pointed toward the defence's goal.

Incomplete pass, penalty declined, or missed kick: arms swung back and forth, flat, across the body.

Safety: palms pressed together above the head.

CHAPTER 5

How the League Works

Thirty-two teams, two conferences, eight divisions and one big game in February.

Conferences and divisions

The NFL has **32 teams**, split into two conferences of 16: the **AFC** (American Football Conference) and the **NFC** (National Football Conference). Each conference has four divisions, **East, North, South and West**, with four teams in each.

Division rivals know each other well: every team plays each team in its own division **twice a season**, once at home and once away.

AFC: American Football Conference

Division	Team	Home stadium
EAST	**Buffalo Bills**	Orchard Park, N.Y. (Buffalo area)
	Miami Dolphins	Miami Gardens, Fla. (Miami area)
	New England Patriots	Foxborough, Mass. (Boston area)
	New York Jets	East Rutherford, N.J. (New York area)
NORTH	**Baltimore Ravens**	Baltimore, Md.
	Cincinnati Bengals	Cincinnati, Ohio
	Cleveland Browns	Cleveland, Ohio
	Pittsburgh Steelers	Pittsburgh, Pa.
SOUTH	**Houston Texans**	Houston, Texas
	Indianapolis Colts	Indianapolis, Ind.
	Jacksonville Jaguars	Jacksonville, Fla.
	Tennessee Titans	Nashville, Tenn.

Division	Team	Home stadium
WEST	**Denver Broncos**	Denver, Colo.
	Kansas City Chiefs	Kansas City, Mo.
	Las Vegas Raiders	Las Vegas, Nev.
	Los Angeles Chargers	Inglewood, Calif. (Los Angeles area)

NFC: National Football Conference

Division	Team	Home stadium
EAST	**Dallas Cowboys**	Arlington, Texas (Dallas area)
	New York Giants	East Rutherford, N.J. (New York area)
	Philadelphia Eagles	Philadelphia, Pa.
	Washington Commanders	Landover, Md. (D.C. area)
NORTH	**Chicago Bears**	Chicago, Ill.
	Detroit Lions	Detroit, Mich.
	Green Bay Packers	Green Bay, Wis.
	Minnesota Vikings	Minneapolis, Minn.
SOUTH	**Atlanta Falcons**	Atlanta, Ga.
	Carolina Panthers	Charlotte, N.C.
	New Orleans Saints	New Orleans, La.
	Tampa Bay Buccaneers	Tampa, Fla.
WEST	**Arizona Cardinals**	Glendale, Ariz. (Phoenix area)
	Los Angeles Rams	Inglewood, Calif. (Los Angeles area)
	San Francisco 49ers	Santa Clara, Calif. (Bay Area)
	Seattle Seahawks	Seattle, Wash.

No NFL team plays in Canada, so every team on these lists is based in the United States.

The season

- Each team plays **17 regular-season games over 18 weeks**, so every team gets one week off, called a **bye week**.
- Most games are on Sunday, with prime-time games on Thursday and Monday nights too.
- The 2026 season kicked off **September 9–10, 2026**, and the regular season ends with **Week 18 on January 9–10, 2027**.
- A schedule formula sets each team's opponents: six games against its own division, four against one other division in its conference, four against a division in the other conference, two more conference games based on last year's standings, and one extra game against the other conference.

The playoffs

Fourteen teams make the playoffs, **seven from each conference**: the four division winners plus three **wild cards** (the best remaining records). Only the **No. 1 seed** in each conference gets a week off, a first-round bye.

Round	2026–27 dates	Who plays
Wild Card Weekend	Jan. 16–18, 2027	Seeds 2 v 7, 3 v 6 and 4 v 5 in each conference; the higher seed hosts.
Divisional Playoffs	Jan. 23–24, 2027	The four winners per conference, including the No. 1 seed.
Conference Championships	Jan. 31, 2027	The last two in each conference play for the AFC and NFC titles.
Super Bowl LXI (LXI = 61)	Feb. 14, 2027	AFC champion v NFC champion at SoFi Stadium, Inglewood, California.

CHAPTER 6

How to Watch

Where to look, what to listen for, and the words that make it all click. You'll watch like you've always known.

Before the snap

- Check the **down and distance** on the screen ("3rd & 4"). It tells you how much pressure the offence is under.
- Find the **score bug**, the box in the corner: score, quarter, game clock, play clock and timeouts left.
- Find the **yellow line**. That is the target for a first down.
- Look at the field position. Inside the opponent's 20-yard line is the **red zone**, where points are close.

During the play

- Watch the quarterback for the first second. Handoff, or drop back to pass?
- Then follow the ball. On a pass, look downfield where it is headed.
- For a fresh view, watch the line for one play. The blocking battle up front decides a lot.

After the whistle

- Look for a **yellow flag**. If there is one, wait for the referee's announcement.
- Check the new down and distance. Did they gain the first down?
- On a close call, watch for a replay review.

The moments that matter

- **Third down:** convert, and the drive stays alive. Miss, and it is usually time to punt.
- **Fourth down:** the gutsiest decision in sports. Punt, kick, or go for it?

- **The two-minute drill:** a team racing the clock at the end of a half, hurrying to the line and stopping the clock any way it can.
- **Turnovers:** interceptions and fumbles flip the momentum in an instant.

Game-day glossary, A to Z

Term	Meaning
Audible	The quarterback changes the play at the line of scrimmage, often by shouting a code word.
Backfield	The area behind the line of scrimmage, where the quarterback and running back line up.
Blitz	Extra defenders rushing the quarterback.
Bye week	A team's one week off during the season.
Challenge	A coach throws a red flag to ask for a video review of a call.
Completion	A forward pass that is caught.
Down	One play. The offence gets four to gain 10 yards.
Drive	One team's series of plays from the moment it gets the ball until it scores or gives the ball up.
End zone	The 10-yard area at each end of the field where touchdowns happen.
Extra point	The one-point kick after a touchdown.
Fair catch	A returner's signal that he will catch a punt or kick without running.
Field goal	A three-point kick through the goalposts.
First down	Gaining 10 yards earns a fresh set of four downs.
Fumble	A ball carrier loses the ball; either team can recover it.
Goal line	The line the ball must cross for a touchdown.
Hash marks	Two rows of short lines down the middle of the field; every play starts on or between them.
Huddle	The quick team meeting before a play to call it.
Incomplete	A forward pass that hits the ground. The clock stops.
Interception	A pass caught by the defence.

Term	Meaning
Line of scrimmage	The imaginary line where each play starts (the blue line on TV).
Neutral zone	The space the length of the ball between the two lines before the snap.
Pick-six	An interception returned for a touchdown.
Play clock	The countdown (40 or 25 seconds) to start the next play.
Pocket	The protected area the offensive line forms around the quarterback.
Punt	A kick on fourth down to push the other team back.
Red zone	Inside the opponent's 20-yard line.
Rush	A running play, or defenders charging at the quarterback.
Sack	Tackling the quarterback behind the line before he throws.
Safety (score)	Two points for the defence after tackling a ball carrier in his own end zone.
Scramble	The quarterback running to escape pressure.
Secondary	The cornerbacks and safeties.
Shotgun	The quarterback lines up several yards behind the centre instead of directly under him.
Snap	The centre passing the ball back to the quarterback to start a play.
Special teams	The units on the field for kicks and punts.
Touchback	A kick downed in or past the end zone; the next play starts at a set yard line.
Touchdown	Six points for getting the ball into the end zone.
Turnover	Losing the ball to the other team: an interception, lost fumble or failed fourth down.
Two-minute warning	An automatic timeout with two minutes left in each half.

Term	Meaning
Two-point conversion	A play from the 2-yard line after a touchdown, worth two points.
Wild card	A playoff team that did not win its division.
YAC	Yards after catch: the distance a receiver gains after catching the ball.

Sound smart at the party

Lines that fit real moments, and that you now understand:

- “Big third down here. Convert, and the drive stays alive.”
- “They’re in the red zone. Let’s see if they get seven or settle for three.”
- “That flag wipes out the gain. Holding, I bet.”
- “Nice play-action. The linebackers bit on the fake.”
- “Fourth and one at midfield. Are they going for it?”
- “He had all day in the pocket on that one.”
- “Touchback, so they start at the 35.”
- “With that lead, expect them to run the ball and keep the clock moving.”

CHAPTER 7

Picking Your Team

There is no wrong way to choose. Here are a few ways people land on theirs.

- **Geography.** The team closest to home, to where you grew up, or to a city you love.
- **Family and friends.** Cheering with the people around you makes every game more fun.
- **Colours and logo.** A perfectly good reason. You will be wearing them.
- **A player you admire.** Follow a player and you will learn the team around them.
- **The story.** Some people love an underdog; others love a team that is always in the race.
- **Your division.** Once you pick, you get rivals for free. Those six division games each season carry extra spice.

> **A simple way to start**
> Pick one team for one season. Watch most of its games, learn a few names on the roster, and check the standings each Monday. By the playoffs, you will follow the whole league with ease.

One last thing

Every fan you know started exactly where you are now. Ask questions out loud, cheer the great plays from both teams, and enjoy the snacks. Welcome to football.

KEEP THIS ONE

Game-Day Cheat Sheet

THE GOAL

More points than the other team after **four 15-minute quarters**.

DOWNS

4 downs to gain 10 yards

Make it: a fresh set of four

"3rd and 2" = third play, 2 to go

4th down: punt, kick or go for it

SCORING

Touchdown: 6

Extra point: 1

Two-point conversion: 2

Field goal: 3

Safety: 2

ON TV

Blue line: where the play starts

Yellow line: first-down target

Red zone: inside the opponent's 20

THE CLOCK

3 timeouts per team, per half

Two-minute warning in each half

40-second play clock

OFFENCE

QB: throws or hands off

RB: runs with the ball

WR: catches passes

TE: blocks and catches

O-line: protects the QB

DEFENCE

D-line: rushes the QB

LB: tackles and covers

CB: covers receivers

S: guards deep

KICKING

K: kickoffs, field goals, extra points

P: punts on fourth down

FLAGS

Yellow: penalty

Red: coach's challenge

False start or offside: 5 yards

Holding (offence): 10 yards

Roughing the passer: 15 + first down

THE LEAGUE

32 teams: AFC and NFC

4 divisions of 4 in each

17 games over 18 weeks

14 playoff teams

Super Bowl LXI: Feb. 14, 2027

Rules and season facts in this guide come from the 2026 Official Playing Rules of the National Football League and NFL Football Operations, checked November 2026. This guide is independent and not affiliated with or endorsed by the NFL.