

“When Is A Passer Under Duress ???”

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When talking about intentional grounding, we use the term “under duress” as a pre-qualifier or requirement for ING to be called. It makes sense... a passer who’s under duress, in trouble or about to be sacked might intentionally throw the ball/pass away to avoid the loss. That said, I’m stumped in finding any reference to a passer being “under duress” in the NCAA Rulebook.

Rule 7 gives three scenarios for intentional ground... 1) throwing a ball directly to the ground to conserve time after the ball has touched the ground or not after immediately controlling the ball; 2) to conserve time the passer throws the ball forward into an area with no eligible Team A receiver; or 3) to conserve yardage throws the ball forward into an area with no eligible Team A receiver. The exception being that the passer outside the tackle box may throw the ball so that it lands/crosses beyond the neutral zone (extended). This exception only applies to the player controlling the snap or backward pass. Nowhere in Rule 7 is the term “duress” used or implied.

The closest wording I could find in the Approved Rulings was the term “heavy rush” which would translate into being under duress by most of us. In speaking with one coach about intentional grounding and the passer being under duress, he semi-jokingly replied that his passer was under duress from the time the snap started, maybe from the time they called the play. He might be right but the reality and purpose of this discussion is on identifying the elements of “under duress” so we can consistently rule on the legality of the pass. Is your definition of duress the same as my definition?

Here’s some indicators of duress... 1) panic on the part of the passer; 2) being chased or forced out of the pocket; 3) rushing the passing attempt because of a “heavy rush”.

QBs/passers who panic show it by rushing a throw because they see or sense the impending contact coming from the rush. They won’t care where the pass goes or if an eligible receiver is in the area. They’re getting rid of the ball hoping it will ease the pain of the hit they’re about to take or just trying to avoid the loss not caring whether it’s called “grounding” or not.

The passer who is chased or forced out of the pocket is different than the passer who sprints on of the pocket on a planned roll out type play. The roll out passer isn’t being forced out of his pocket or protection. Whether he’s under duress will depend on the rush and competency of his blockers. But simply rolling out is not an indicator of duress. When the passer is trying to set up or is set up in the pocket and now pulls the ball down and scrambles to avoid a potential sack, this is being under duress. If he chooses to pass then he needs to find an eligible receiver or get outside the tackle box and get the pass to or beyond the NZ to avoid the ING penalty.

The question we hear the most is, "Is it duress when the passer, under a heavy rush, stands his ground without flinching and throws it away? He didn't show panic nor did he get flushed out of the pocket. At best he just dipped a shoulder to avoid contact and maintained his focus downfield trying to find a receiver. No receiver is in the area and the passer was not outside the tackle box." Assuming the pass is not tipped nor the passer's throw altered by the defender's contact, the passer will be responsible for where he throws the pass when he is under duress or a heavy rush. So the answer is "yes" this is considered duress.

Make sure your wing officials understand grounding situations too. They won't be throwing the flag but they need to recognize "hot plays" and communicate in a timely manner with the Referee so the correct judgment can be made on a legal versus illegal pass situation. If the wing official has an eligible receiver that will trump being in/out of the tackle box and getting the pass to/or beyond the NZ. Just touch your chest indicating "eligible number" and then point to the eligible receiver. The Referee can turn on his microphone and announce, "There's no foul for intentional grounding. Eligible receiver #80 was in the area." If no receiver is in the area and the pass is suspect for ING, immediately spring back to your Referee and tell him whether the pass made it to the NZ or not. Now it's in the Referee's hands for the passer being in or outside the tackle box. How quickly this is communicated to the Referee is important so he can be as accurate as possible on this spot foul enforcement.

One veteran official once told me that if your QB is not under duress within two seconds after the snap, then you or your Umpire probably should have a flag for holding.

If being under duress is a component of intentional grounding, the next question is if the QB/passer is NOT under duress can he just end the play by throwing the ball into an area where there is no receiver or if he's still in the tackle box, just throwing the ball forward to the ground and incomplete? And how about the QB/passer who throws the ball high over the end line when deep in the red zone? Most would argue that the passer is not avoiding a loss of yardage when no "heavy rush" is imminent. He's only giving up the down. However, if time is a factor this could be an attempt to conserve time if all receivers are covered and the play just isn't developing. This scenario will be a rarity to see but one to think about how you'll handle it when it does occur.