

FALL 2026 FLAG FOOTBALL RULES

(Updated 7/14/2026)

Recent rule changes will appear highlighted and italicized.

The rules for The University of Iowa Intramural Flag Football are derived from the NIRSA Flag & Touch Football Rules Book & Officials' Manual, unless otherwise stated within this document. The current NIRSA Flag & Touch Football Rules Book & Officials' Manual will apply in all cases not specifically covered below.

Rule 1: Facility

1. All games will be played at the Hawkeye Recreation Fields unless otherwise noted. Alcohol and tobacco are not permitted inside the complex or in the parking lot.

Rule 2: Player Eligibility

1. All Intramural Sports eligibility rules apply. Please check the [Intramural Sports Rules and Regulations](#) carefully
2. Prior to participating, all players must check-in with the Sport Programs Supervisor. To check-in, each participant must have a photo available through IMLeagues, or must provide a University of Iowa or government-issued photo ID.

Rule 3: Team Composition

1. The game shall be played between two teams of seven players each on the field at one time. A minimum of four players are required to prevent a forfeit.
2. For Co-Rec, the game shall be played between two teams of eight players each on the field at one time. A minimum of five players are required to prevent a forfeit. Additionally, a team's on-field lineup can never have a gender difference greater than two.
3. Roster sizes are unlimited.

Rule 4: Equipment

1. *The Sport Programs staff retains the right to require any jewelry or items deemed dangerous to be removed prior to participation, or continued participation (Updated Summer 2026).*
2. Each player on the field must wear a one-piece belt at the waistline with three flags permanently attached, one flag to each hip and one to the center of the back.
 - a. **(Failure to wear required equipment – PENALTY: 5 yards)**
3. Cleats are limited to studs or projections that do not exceed ½ inch in length and are made with non-abrasive rubber or rubber-type synthetic material, which does not chip or develop a cutting edge.
 - a. **No metal cleats will be allowed.**
4. Players may wear a stocking cap. It may have a knit ball attached. The cap must have no bill.
5. Players may wear a headband. Rubber or elastic bands may only be used to control hair.
6. Illegal equipment consists of pads, shoulder pads, or any unyielding or dangerous equipment, which include shoes with detachable cleats unless the screw is part of the cleat. Any slippery or sticky substance of a foreign nature on equipment or exposed parts of the body is illegal.
7. All players must keep shirts always tucked in. A cut-off shirt short enough that does not interfere with the flags is permissible.
 - a. A cut-off shirt must be at least four inches from the bottom of the jersey to the player's waistline.

8. Cutoff or sleeveless shirt openings may hang no lower than four inches from the armpit.
9. When any illegal equipment is found on any player or incoming substitute, the illegal equipment must be removed before participation.
 - a. If illegal equipment removal takes more than 25 seconds, that player must be replaced for at least one down, or the team may call a team time-out.

Rule 5: Beginning a Game

1. Before the start of the game the referee shall toss a coin in the presence of the opposing captains, after first designating which captain shall call the coin toss.
 - a. The captain of the winning toss shall choose one of the following options.
 - i. Offense.
 - ii. Defense.
 - iii. To designate which goal their team will defend.
 - iv. To have the choice of the above options to begin the second half (defer).
 - b. The loser of the toss shall make a choice of the remaining options.
2. Before the coin toss, the referee will approve each team's game ball. If needed, a football will be made available for check-out by Intramural Sports.
 - i. Men's/Open shall use the regular size ball only.
 - ii. A regular, intermediate, youth, or junior size football can be used for Women's, Unified, and Co-Rec games.
3. The ball shall be put into play on the 14-yard line at the beginning of the game, at the beginning of the second half, after a score, and after a safety by a scrimmage down, unless moved by penalty.

Rule 6: Game Time and Time-outs

1. Playing time shall be 40 minutes, divided into four periods of 10 minutes each. There will be a five-minute intermission between halves. Between the first and second period and between the third and fourth period, the teams shall change goals. Team possession, number of the next down, and the zone line-to-gain remain unchanged.
 - a. The time between the first and second period and between the third and fourth period shall be no more than one minute. At approximately two minutes before the end of the second half the referee shall stop the clock and inform both captains of the playing time remaining in the half. The starting of the clock depends on the previous play.
 - b. During the final two minutes of the second half only the clock stops for:
 - i. Incomplete Pass – starts on the snap.
 - ii. Out-of-Bounds – starts on the snap.
 - iii. Penalty and Administration – depends on the previous play.
 - Exception: following delay of game - clock starts on the snap.
 - iv. Touchdown – starts on the succeeding snap after the extra point try.
 - v. Team Time-Out – starts on the snap.
 - vi. First Down – depends on the previous play.
 - vii. Official's Time-Out – starts at the referee's discretion.
 - viii. Touchback – starts on the snap.
 - ix. Safety – starts on the snap.
 - x. New series for Team B – starts on the snap.
2. The clock will start when the ball is legally snapped and will run continuously during the first, second, and third periods, and during the first 8 minutes of the fourth period, except for a team time-out or an official's time-out.

3. Each team is entitled to three time-outs during each half. Time-outs will be no longer than one minute. The time-outs not used during the first half may not be used in the second half. No time-outs will be granted after a team uses all its time-outs. In the case of overtime, each team is entitled to only one time-out for all overtime periods combined.
4. If the game is tied at the end of the second half, the following procedures are used:
 - a. Overtime Periods – All overtime periods are played towards the same goal line. A coin toss, as in the beginning of the game, will determine the options.
 - i. If additional overtime periods are played, field captains will alternate option choices. Each team will have one play to score a touchdown beginning from the 10-yard line.
 - ii. Overtime periods thereafter will continue with each team getting one play from the 10-yard line to score a touchdown.
 - b. No extra point conversion will be attempted after a score in overtime.
 - c. Penalties shall be assessed according to the regular rules of the game.
 - d. Each play shall begin from scrimmage and shall be limited to running and passing plays.
 - i. No kicks from scrimmage are permitted.
 - e. When the defensive team secures possession of a live ball, the ball is dead, and the period is over.
 - f. The goal line shall always be the line-to-gain in overtime.

Rule 7: Flag Belts

1. All players must wear flags while on the playing field.
2. The flags will be fastened to the belt in such a manner as not to be twisted under, or fastened to, the inside of the belt.
3. Two flags are to hang down vertically along the side seam of the trousers and one down the center of the back.
4. Solid belts will be comprised of three flags. The ball carrier will be declared down when the belt clip becomes unfastened when pulled by a defensive player, the belt is torn into more than one piece, or the flag is torn off the belt.
 - a. If the defensive player pulls the belt and it does not immediately become unfastened, the ball carrier will not be considered down until the belt does become unfastened.
5. If the flag belt should become unfastened without being pulled by a defensive player, the play will remain live until a defensive player legally tags the runner between the shoulders and knees with one hand.
6. If a defensive player unfastens an offensive player's belt after having thrown a forward or backward pass, the player is still eligible to advance the ball.
 - a. They must be tagged with one hand between the shoulders and knees if they receive the ball again.
7. A defensive player intentionally pulling a flag from an offensive player without the ball is illegal.
 - a. **(PENALTY – Personal Foul - 10 yards)**
8. It is illegal for any player to participate in a play with an illegally secured flag belt.
 - a. **(PENALTY – Personal Foul – 10 yards from previous spot – player ejection – loss of down if player is on offense, automatic first down if player is on defense)**

Rule 8: Definitions of Playing Terms

1. **CATCH:** A catch is the act of establishing player possession of a live ball which is in flight, and first contacting the ground inbounds or being contacted by an opponent in such a way that they

are prevented from returning to the ground inbounds while maintaining possession of the ball. Sideline cones are considered out-of-bounds.

- a. If one foot first lands inbounds and the receiver has possession and control of the ball, it is a catch even though a subsequent step or fall takes the receiver out-of-bounds.
2. **FIGHTING:** Fighting is an attempt by a player or non-player to strike or engage an opponent in a combative manner. Such acts include, but are not limited to: attempts to strike an opponent(s) with the arm(s), hand(s), leg(s), or foot (feet) whether or not there is contact.

Rule 9: Ball in Play, Dead Ball, Out-of-Bounds

1. A live ball becomes dead when an official sounds their whistle or declares it dead:
 - a. When the ball goes out-of-bounds or when it touches the ground.
 - b. When any part of the ball carrier's person other than the hand or foot touches the ground.
 - i. **NOTE:** The ball carrier may contact the ball to the ground and the ball will remain live if the ball carrier maintains possession of the ball and as long as no other body parts other than the foot or hand are in contact with the ground. The ball is considered to be part of the hand.
 - c. When a touchdown, touchback, safety, or try for point is made.
 - d. When a forward pass strikes the ground or is caught simultaneously by opposing players.
 - i. When a simultaneous catch occurs, the ball will be awarded to the offense.
 - e. When a backward pass or fumble by a player touches the ground; this includes a snap.
 - i. **EXAMPLE:** On protected scrimmage kicks, the ball will be considered dead if it hits the ground at any time after the snap and before it is kicked.
 - ii. **NOTE:** A backward pass or fumble in flight may be caught or intercepted by any other player in bounds and advanced.
 - f. When a ball carrier has a flag belt removed legally by a defensive player.
 - g. When a ball carrier is legally touched with one hand below the shoulders once the flag belt is no longer attached.
 - h. A muffed or dropped scrimmage kick is dead when it strikes the ground.
 - i. When the kicking team touches a scrimmage kick, the receiving team can take possession at the point of first touching by the kicking team.
 - ii. **NOTE:** A scrimmage kick that falls to the ground untouched will remain live until the ball comes completely to rest or breaks the plane of R's goal line.
 - i. When an inadvertent whistle occurs.
2. **BALL BLOWN DEAD:** In flag football, it is not uncommon for a play to be mistakenly blown dead. In these cases, the offensive team shall have the option of replaying the down or accepting the ball at the spot where it was blown dead. On loose balls, such as a backward pass, the team in possession may elect to put the ball in play where possession was lost or replay the down. If blown during a legal forward pass, the ball will be put in play at the previous spot and the down will be replayed.
3. **INBOUNDS SPOT:** If the ball becomes dead between the hash marks, the ball shall be placed at that approximate spot. If the ball becomes dead outside the hash marks in a side zone, the ball will be placed at the nearest hash mark at the corresponding yard line.

Rule 10: Series of Downs, Number of Downs

1. When a first down is legally gained in a zone, the team in possession of the ball is allowed four downs in which to move it from that point into the next zone.

2. The most forward point of the ball, when declared dead between the goal lines, shall be the determining factor.

Rule 11: Kicking the Ball

1. All punts must be declared to the referee, before the ready-for-play whistle. The referee shall notify the defensive team of the declaration to punt.
 - a. Players on either team may not enter the neutral zone until after the ball has been kicked.
 - i. **(PENALTY –Illegal procedure (live ball) – 5 yards and the offensive team retains the down.)**
 - b. The kicker, after possessing the snap, must kick the ball immediately in a continuous motion.
 - i. **(PENALTY –Illegal Procedure– 5 yards).**
 - c. If the ball hits the ground at any time after the snap and before it is kicked, it is dead at that spot.
 - d. A ball that is snapped out of the back of the end zone will be ruled a safety.
 - e. Quick kicks are not allowed.
 - i. All punts must be declared to the referee prior to the down.
 - f. When a punt breaks the plane of the receiving team’s goal line, it is a touchback unless R chooses the spot of first touching by K.

Rule 12: Snapping, Handing, and Passing the Ball

1. Any member of the passing team is an eligible receiver.
 - a. All forward passes must be from behind the line of scrimmage.
 - b. Only one forward pass per down is permitted.
2. **BALL IN PLAY:** A team gets 25 seconds to put the ball in play after it is signaled ready for play by the referee.
 - a. **(PENALTY –Delay of Game– 5 yards)**
3. **SNAPPING:** The snapper need not have their shoulders parallel to the line of scrimmage or snap the ball between their legs for the snap to be legal.
 - a. The snapper may have one or both knees on the ground at the snap.
 - b. Ball must be snapped to a player at least two yards behind the line of scrimmage.
 - c. The snapper may not snap the ball to themselves.
 - i. A team may legally spike the ball to prevent loss of time in the final minutes of each half.
 - d. **(PENALTY – Illegal Snap – 5 yards)**
4. **LEGAL POSITION:** Anytime on or after the ball is marked ready for play, each offensive player must be set and be at least 5 yards inbounds before the snap.
 - a. **EXCEPTION:** One player may be in motion at the time of the snap, but they must move laterally or backwards. They cannot move towards the line of scrimmage at the time of the snap.
 - b. **(PENALTY – Illegal Formation - 5 yards.)**
5. **MINIMUM LINE PLAYERS:** The snapper is the only player required to be on their line of scrimmage (orange puck) at the snap.

Rule 13: Onside Kick

1. If a team is trailing at any point in the second half (only the team trailing in the 2nd half has this option) they have the option of attempting an “onside kick”. Onside kick procedures are:

- a. Immediately following a try for extra points (successful or unsuccessful) the offensive team must declare that it wishes to attempt an “onside kick”
 - i. The “onside kick play will be untimed and is attempted from the 20-yard line (same as a 3 point try would be). The offense will have one play to advance the ball into the endzone; no points are awarded for the onside kick attempt, whether its successful or not
 - ii. If the “onside kick” attempt is successful, the offense will retain possession and start a new series at their 30-yard line, unless moved by a penalty.
 - iii. If the “onside kick” is unsuccessful the defense will gain possession and start a new series at their 30-yard line, unless moved by a penalty.
 - iv. The clock will resume running on the next series’ ready for play whistle; if there is less than 2 minutes remaining in the game the clock will start on the next series’ snap.

Rule 14: Defensive Rush

1. The defense must rush the person receiving the snap from at least 7 yards away from the line of scrimmage
 1. The rush line will be indicated by a cone on the field. It is illegal to rush the opposing team in front of the rush line.
 1. Rush: When a defensive player crosses the neutral zone into the opposing team’s side of the field.
 2. **(PENALTY – Illegal Rush – 5 yards)**
 2. If the nearest Zone Line to Gain is within 7 yards of the line of scrimmage, the Zone Line to Gain will be the rush cone.
 1. **Example:** Team A is 3rd and Goal from the 3-yard line. The rush cone would be placed at the goal line. Team B can rush from the goal line at the snap.
 3. If a backward pass/handoff occurs, the rush rule will no longer apply and any player on defense can rush the ball carrier from anywhere on the field.

Rule 15: Scoring Plays and Touchback

1. **SCORING:**
 - b. Touchdown – 6 points.
 - c. Extra point try: 1 point from 3 yards; 2 points from 10 yards; 3 points from 20 yards
 - i. If, during a try, the defense intercepts a ball that is thrown or fumbled in flight, the play is blown dead immediately, and the try is over.
 - d. Safety – 2 points.
 - i. After a safety, the team that scored the safety will put the ball into play on its own 14-yard line with a new series of scrimmage downs.
2. **MERCY RULE:** If a team is 19 or more points ahead when the referee announces the two-minute warning for the second half, or any time after that, the game is over.
3. **FOULS ON A SCORE:** If there is a foul by the defensive team during a down that results in a successful touchdown, the scoring team may choose to have the foul enforced at the succeeding spot of the try or after the try on the 14-yard line. If there is a foul by the defensive team during a successful try, the scoring team may choose to have the foul enforced at the succeeding spot (14-yard line).
4. **Forfeit/Default score:** 14-0 for a team winning by default/forfeit, 14-14 for a double forfeit.

Rule 16: Conduct of Players and Others

1. **BLOCKING:** Offensive screen blocking should take place without an attempt to contact an opponent. The screen blocker shall position their hands and arms at their sides or behind their back. Any use of the hands, arms, elbows, legs, or body to initiate contact during a screen block is illegal. A player must be on their feet before, during, and after screen blocking. Some legal incidental contact may occur.
 - a. **(PENALTY – Personal Foul – 10 yards)**
 - i. Screen Blocking Fundamentals - A player who screens shall not:
 - Take a position closer than a normal step when behind a stationary opponent.
 - Initiate contact when assuming a position at the side or in front of a stationary opponent.
 - Take a position so close to a moving opponent that their opponent cannot avoid contact by stopping or changing direction. The speed of the player to be screened will determine where the screener may take their stationary position. This position will vary and may be one-to-two normal strides from the opponent.
2. **DEFENSIVE RESTRICTION:** Defensive players may not use their hands on blockers. They must attempt to avoid blockers; they are not allowed to run through blockers. Incidental contact with the hands will be allowed, but should the defender gain an advantage by use of the hands, they will be penalized.
 - a. **(PENALTY – Personal Foul – 10 yards)**
3. **TACKLING:** It is a foul to tackle, trip, kick, push, shove, or elbow the ball carrier or blocker. It is also a foul for a defensive player to strip or attempt to strip the ball by punching, striking, or stealing it. The runner's forward progress cannot be impeded in any way.
 - a. **(PENALTY –Personal Foul – 10 yards. If flagrant ADDITIONAL PENALTY – Disqualification)**
4. **BALL CARRIER AND RUNNING WITH THE BALL:** It is a penalty for the ball carrier to “stiff arm”, charge into, knee, kick, or try to knock over a player at any time.
 - a. **(PENALTY –Personal Foul– 10 yards).**
 - i. Spinning is legal; however, the ball carrier must be in control of their person at all times.
 - ii. Hurdling is not allowed.
 - iii. Diving is allowed; however, the ball carrier cannot contact a defender while in the act of diving.
 - iv. **THE BALL CARRIER MUST TRY TO AVOID CONTACT WITH ALL DEFENSIVE PLAYERS AT ALL TIMES.**
5. **ROUGH TACTICS:** Any rough tactics, such as lowering one's shoulder in an attempt to run over an opponent, must be penalized as flagrant and unnecessary roughness.
 - a. **(PENALTY –Personal Foul– 10 yards, ejection, and suspension)**
6. **UNNECESSARY ROUGHNESS:** For unnecessary roughness, the **penalty is 10 yards and disqualification if flagrant.**
7. **DISQUALIFICATION:** Whenever, in the judgment of the officials or supervisor, a player or players may be involved in any deliberate or flagrant violation of the rules, the person will be ejected, and their team penalized 10 yards. This includes fouls, dirty or abusive language, or violent protest by either word or action against any official or other players. In the judgment of any official or supervisor any type of unsportsmanlike conduct by any player or team will be

penalized by a 10-yard penalty and if the official feels it necessary, they can eject players or forfeit the game. Players or spectators will be automatically ejected if they physically (or attempt to) contact an official or supervisor. Any player ejected for unsportsmanlike conduct will be required to sit out a minimum of the next scheduled game for their team. Repeat disqualifications can result in expulsion from the league and future intramural sports.

8. **FOULS TO PREVENT PLAY:** If the defensive team commits a foul so near its own goal line that they can be penalized only by halving the distance to the goal line, the object being (in the opinion of the referee) to consume time, it shall be regarded as a refusal to allow play to proceed. In that event, the referee shall warn the offending team once and then if the offense is repeated, an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty shall be issued to the offending player.
9. **TEAMS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR PLAYERS AND FANS:** Players and fans must remain at least three yards from the sideline. Fans must stand on the opposite side of the field as the players.
 - a. **(PENALTY: First Offense - warning, Second Offense – 5 yards, Thereafter – 10 yards)**

Rule 17: Enforcement of Penalties

1. 5-YARD PENALTIES:

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| a. Delay of Game | i. Illegal Forward Pass (Also loss of down) |
| b. False Start | j. Illegal Backward Pass (Also loss of down) |
| c. Encroachment (10 yards for 2 or more consecutive encroachments by the same team) | k. Intentional Grounding (Also loss of down) |
| d. Illegal Procedure | l. Illegal Substitution |
| e. Illegal Motion | m. Failure to Wear Required Equipment |
| f. Illegal Shift | n. Illegal Advancement (Co-Rec) |
| g. Illegal Snap | o. Helping the Runner |
| h. Illegal Formation | |

2. 10-YARD PENALTIES:

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|---|---|
| a. Illegal Contact | g. Sideline Interference |
| b. Illegal Participation | h. Illegal Equipment |
| c. Offensive Pass Interference | i. Kick Catch Interference |
| d. Defensive Pass Interference | j. Holding |
| e. Roughing the Passer (Automatic First Down) | k. Flag Guarding |
| f. Unsportsmanlike Conduct (Loss of Down if on Offense, Automatic First Down if on Defense) | l. Illegal Batting |
| | m. Illegal Kicking |
| | n. Illegally Secured Flag Belt (Loss of Down) |

1. **POST SCRIMMAGE KICK ENFORCEMENT:** A post scrimmage kick (PSK) foul is any live ball foul by a player on the receiving team that occurs on the receiver's side of the neutral zone prior to the end of the kick during a punt that ends beyond the neutral zone and the kicking team does not have possession at the end of the down. The enforcement spot is the spot where the kick ends. The receiving team retains possession of the ball after enforcement, first down and one line to gain. If the spot of the PSK foul is behind the spot where the kick ends, the enforcement spot will be from the spot of the foul. If the kick ends in the end zone, any PSK foul will be enforced from the succeeding spot, the 14-yard line.

Rule 18: Unified Flag Football Differences

The Unified game will use the same rules as Men's/Open and Women's with the following modifications.

1. **Number of Players:** Seven players can be on the field for each team at one time. A minimum of four players are required to start the game and avoid a forfeit. On-field lineup differences between Athletes and Partners can never be greater than two.
2. **Field:** The Unified field will be split into three, 20-yard zones. Each time a team moves the ball into a new zone they will achieve a first down.
3. **Rush Cone:** Any defensive player that chooses to rush the quarterback must start beyond/behind the defensive rush cone. The defensive rush cone will be placed seven yards from the offensive line of scrimmage, players are allowed to line up in front of the cone but can't rush the quarterback.
4. **Mouth Protection:** Unified Athletes are required to have mouth guards when participating in flag football.
5. **Gameplay:** Each play must involve an athlete (individual with an intellectual disability). Involvement includes either an athlete running the ball through the line of scrimmage on running plays or passing or receiving a pass on passing plays.

Rule 18: Co-Rec Flag Football Differences

The Co-Rec game will use the same rules as the Men's/Open and Women's game with the following modifications.

1. **NUMBER OF PLAYERS:** Eight players can be on the field for each team at one time. A minimum of five players are required to start the game and avoid a forfeit. The legal co-rec team combinations are as follows:
 - a. Team of 8: 4 men and 4 women; 5 men and 3 women; 3 men and 5 women
 - b. Team of 7: 3 men and 4 women; 4 men and 3 women
 - c. Team of 6: 3 men and 3 women; 4 men and 2 women; 2 men and 4 women
 - d. Team of 5: 3 men and 2 women; 2 men and 3 women
 - i. The game may be continued with less than five players if, in the referee's opinion, the team has a chance to win.
 - ii. If proper ratio is not used:
 - **(Penalty: Illegal participation, 10 yards.)**
2. **THE BALL:** The regular, intermediate, youth or junior size football shall be used in Co-Rec play.
3. **RUNNERS:** An offensive man runner may only advance the ball through Team A's scrimmage line:
 - a. During a run by a man runner after the ball has been legally touched beyond the scrimmage line;
 - b. After change of team possession;
 - c. After a legal forward pass.
 - i. **In all other instances where a man advances the ball beyond the line of scrimmage, a 5-yard illegal procedure penalty will be assessed.**
4. **MAN-TO-MAN COMPLETION:** During the offensive team's possession there may not be two consecutive legal forward pass completions from a man passer to a man receiver. This rule also applies to a try. If a man passer completes a legal forward pass to a man receiver, the next legal forward pass completion must involve either a woman passer or a woman receiver for positive yards.
 - a. **(Penalty: Illegal Reception, 5 yards from the spot where the second consecutive man-to-man completed forward pass is released, and a loss of down.)**

- i. Any pass caught simultaneously by man and woman teammates is considered a woman reception. Any foul, whether accepted or declined shall have no effect on whether the next legal forward pass completion is “open” or “closed.”
- ii. The term “open” means any player may complete a forward pass to any other player. The term “closed” means a woman must be involved in the forward pass to advance the line of scrimmage.

INCLEMENT WEATHER

If there is inclement weather and Intramural Sports are scheduled, check the [Intramural Sports website](#) for cancellation information. The Sport Programs Staff will also attempt to notify participants scheduled to play that night. You can also sign-up for Intramural Sports notifications through the [Recreational Services app](#).

LIGHTNING POLICY

In the case of lightning within 8 miles of the game site during outdoor sports, play will be suspended. Play may not resume until there have been zero lightning strikes within 8 miles for 30 minutes. Determinations on lightning strikes will be made by Sport Programs Staff on-site using lightning detection software. Lightning detected by the system does not need to be visible to participants or staff.