



CORNY'S CORNER

“Ugly” Is Not A Ball Handling Violation Corny Galdones

Ball handling judgment is perhaps the most important officiating skill for a volleyball referee. Ball handling is the core of the game. Every time any player contacts the ball, that's ball handling in one form or another. All through the playing action, a referee must decide on what to call and what not to call. Having a grasp of the ball handling rules and an “eye” to make judgment calls are critical. A referee is expected to call violations on all blatant or obvious ball handling errors. There's some leeway for a referee to judge whether or not a marginal ball handling action should be called. That's a gray area.

Ball Handling Criteria. On a team's first ball contact in any attack, the ball cannot come to rest or be held. On the second or third contact, the ball cannot be double contacted, come to rest or be held. Make sure you see two separate contacts or the ball being caught or thrown before calling a violation. It does not matter what the player or the ball does before the contact is made or after contact is completed. All that matters is what happens while the player is in contact with the ball. “Ugly” is not a ball handling violation. Nor is inferior talent, poor technique, bad body position, contact sound, or ball spin. If the player or the ball does something unusual or surprising, that is not necessarily a ball handling error. Once you understand these concepts and incorporate them into your decision-making, you have a sound base to judge ball handling.

Judgment Standard. What is legal and allowed for ball handling is left to the referee's discretion. Some referees call it tight or by the book. This standard does not leave much room for judgment error, especially at the higher competition levels where a ball handling action may seem illegal but is executed legally because of the better playing skills. Other referees call it loose and let the players play. This standard is more apt to get complaints from those coaches and players who favor tighter calls. Most referees call it somewhere between these two limits. No one is wrong. Each referee established a correct ball handling standard that's personally comfortable to use.

Consistency. In any given match, the teams and players will adapt to whether it's called tight or loose, so long as there is consistency. Trouble starts when similar play actions are not called the same way. Observe the teams during warm-ups. Watch for peculiarities of the setters and tendencies of the hitters. Determine a correct standard you'll be at ease in using that is in line with the players' abilities. Set your standard to the skill level of the better team. Whatever standard you start the match with, stick to it for the entire match.

Judgment Technique. Ignore how the ball handler is positioned to the ball. Zone in on only the player's body parts making actual contact with the ball. Evaluate what happens **during** (not *before* or *after*) the entire contact. If the ball comes to a stop, it's a held ball violation. If the player stays in contact with the ball for a long time or distance, *i.e.*, not quick, it's a held ball violation. The length of contact allowed should be the same for all types of ball handling action. If the player starts the ball one way then changes direction, it's a held ball violation. If a player bobbles the ball or two body parts of the player touch the ball at separate instances during the team's second or third contact, it's a double hit violation. Anticipate a violation, but keep your whistle in check. Practice the three R's. **Ready. Read** the ball handling action. **React** to whistle a violation.

Call only what you see. Don't guess. If you get screened from the action, get visual help from the second referee. Once the ball is released and the contact is considered legal, do not track the ball after it goes above your eye level. Instead, look ahead to the court area where the ball will end up. Identify the next ball handler and watch the hitters and blockers get into position. This will give you a better overall picture of the coming action and more time to get ready.

Keeping Up With The Action. The better the players, the faster the action. There will be less time between ball contacts to prepare. Do not follow a moving ball. Zoom forward with rapid eye and head movements to where the next contact might occur. During an attack, quickly shift your view from attacker to net to defense. Observe all of the hitter's attack. Then skip to the net for possible contacts of the ball by the blockers. After the ball goes by the blockers, find the defensive player who will be playing the ball. Get there before the ball. If your eyes are still moving and not focused at the moment of contact, you can miss a call.

Situations. The ball may be handled in countless ways. Here are rough sketches of more common situations. The live action may differ.

- The ball may slip off or out of the hands of a player receiving the ball with a setting motion. On the second or third contact, it's probably a double hit violation. On the first contact, it may be sloppy for being mangled or poorly controlled, but it's legal. However, if the ball is "massaged" or over-controlled in this instance, then it's a held ball violation.
- When the ball immediately pops off a one-hand set, a double hit violation is very unlikely even if the ball is imparted with lots of spin. Call a lift violation if the hand stays in contact with the ball for a long duration in time or distance.
- When a spike is blocked, the deflected ball can fly anywhere. The quickly reacting players will do anything to keep it in play. Expect the unexpected. If the ball comes down at the net, get visual help from the second referee for a possible ball handling violation. If the player pins the ball against the cable or net, it's a held ball violation. The blocked spike may bounce back into the attacker. If the attacker has any body part above the height of the net when this happens, it is considered a block. If the attacker is entirely below the top of the net, it is considered the first team contact.
- On a power block the ball is pushed straight down with force in any direction by the blocker's hands. The initial contact must be made in front of the blocker and not directly over the head. If not, the blocker more than likely started the ball forward then changed its direction down, which is a held ball violation.
- On a power tip the ball is propelled forward with force by the finger tips of the attacker. The attacker's hand must already be moving forward before contact is made. If not, the ball was stopped upon contact with the stationary hand then projected forward, which is a held ball violation. Be alert for a throwing motion, palming of the ball, change in direction during contact, or a long distance in which the attacker stayed in contact with the ball. Any of these actions is a held ball violation.
- A player could do a "deep dish" set, staying in downward contact with the ball then releasing it upward. The contact must be brief. If not, the contact probably will be long in either distance or time, thus being a held ball violation.

There is a lot of subjectivity involved in ball handling calls because of their general criteria. Understanding and putting into practice the spirit of the rule and its nuances is hard for some volleyball referees to master, easier for others. Regardless, developing competency in ball handling judgment is essential for all referees. This officiating skill cannot remain static, however. It must evolve to keep up with any rule changes or advances in the game. The keys are to call all obvious ball handling errors and to find a correct, flexible standard for borderline ball handling actions that you are comfortable with and can apply with consistency throughout a match.