

## **ESTABLISHING STANDARDS FOR CALLING HANDS – 2010**

### **“UGLY IS NOT A BALL-HANDLING VIOLATION”**

**Ball-Handling Criteria.** On a team’s first contact, 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. It doesn’t 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. Thus, we have the concept that “ugly” is not a ball-handling violation. Nor is inferior talent, poor technique, bad body position, contact sound or ball spin. If a player or the ball does something unusual or surprising, that is not necessarily a ball-handling error. Once these concepts are understood and incorporated into a R1’s decision-making, there is a sound base to judge ball handling. The key is that each R1 has to establish a standard by which to judge ball handling.

**Judgment Standard.** What is legal and allowed for ball handling is left to the first referee’s discretion. Some first referees call it tighter 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 first referees call it loosely and let the players play. This standard is more apt to get complaints from coaches and players who favor tighter calls and, especially, teams with superior setter hands. Most first referees call it somewhere between these two limits. None of these approaches is wrong. Each official establishes a ball-handling standard that’s personally comfortable to use and tries to have this standard within a range that players/teams/coaches find understandable.

**Consistency.** In any given match, the teams and players will adapt to the R1’s judgment in calling ball-handling violations. Officials need to call the match in as consistent a manner as is humanly possible. Trouble starts when similar playing actions are not called the same way. To work toward consistency, the match officials have to observe both teams during warm-ups. They need to watch for peculiarities of each setter and tendencies of the hitters. This helps them determine a reasonable standard that they’ll be at ease in using that is in line with the players’ abilities and within a range that allows the match to play without being over-whistled. As taught to officials at the highest level of the game, the R1 needs to tilt the standard toward the skill level of the better team. We also have to think about adjusting to the competition level so that we make about the same number of ball-handling calls every match. This is a goal that aims at not refusing to make hands calls but calling only those ball-handling faults that have to be called to uphold a reasonable standard of play.

Regardless, whatever standard the R1 starts the match with is the one that has to be adhered to for the entire match to allow the teams to know what is considered legal and illegal. The adage that is taught to officials is to not call a fault on a ball handle early in the match that the R1 would not want to call at the end of a tight set. In reality, the tendency that officials have is to allow looser hands when a set is on the line. This awareness can help officials set hands early in the match and sustain that level of calling hands throughout the match.

**Judgment Technique.** In judging handling, officials need to avoid pre-judging a handle by how the ball handler is positioned to the ball. It’s important to zone in on only the player’s body parts making actual contact with the ball and evaluating what happens during (not before or after) the entire contact. If the ball comes to a stop, prolonged contact has occurred, and this violation should be called. An example is long setter hands when back-setting a “10” or lowering the set in setting a “1” or a “3” to a middle hitter. Extended contact with the ball constitutes a violation and should be called on first, second or third contact.

The length of contact the official allows should be the same for all types of ball-handling actions. A violation also should be called when a player starts the ball one way and then changes direction.

And, if two body parts of the player touch the ball at separate instances during the team's second or third contact, a double-hit violation should be called. This includes a player taking a free ball over the net on the third contact and there's a double-hit. There's no freebie on the third ball. Either prolonged or multiple contacts are illegal and should be called. The R1 should anticipate a violation, but keep whistle in check until it's clear that there was a violation.

To help judge ball handling, officials are urged to practice what Corny refers to as the "**Three R's.**" **Ready. Read** the ball-handling action, and then **React** to whistle a violation when one occurs. The officials have to call only what they see. The R1 shouldn't guess that a handling violation occurred. If screened from the action, the second referee needs to offer visual help in the form of an informal signal of prolonged contact or double hit or, if the R1 were clearly screened, this is a call where NFHS allows the second referee to whistle the fault if absolutely certain. Once the ball is released from player contact, and you consider the contact legal, the R1 should not track the ball after it goes above eye level. Instead, we are instructed to look ahead to the court area where the ball will end up. We have to identify the next likely ball handler and watch the hitters and blockers get into position. This will give the officials 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 is a given of the game of volleyball. The higher the level of play, the less time between ball contacts for the officials to prepare. One key for the R1 is to not follow a moving ball. The R1 needs to zoom forward with rapid eye and head movement to where the next contact might occur. During an attack, the R1's view has to quickly shift from attacker to net to defense. The R1 observes all of the hitter's attack, then skips to the net for possible contacts of the ball by the blockers. After the ball goes by the blockers, the R1 has to find the defensive player who will be playing the ball and get there before the ball arrives. If eyes are still moving and not focused at the moment of contact, it's easier to miss a call.

**Situations.** Reality is that the ball may be handled in countless ways. Here are some rough sketches of more common situations. 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 2nd or 3rd contact, it's likely a double-hit violation. On the first contact, it may be sloppy by being mangled or poorly controlled, but it's probably legal. However, if the ball is "massaged" or over-controlled, then this should be considered prolonged contact, and a fault should be whistled. And this is one of those first-ball contact situations where if the ball rolls dramatically in the fingers, which is considered multiple contacts elsewhere, the general expectation is that some of these will be called prolonged-contact faults.

Another situation involves when a spike is blocked; the deflected ball can (and will!) fly anywhere. Players reacting quickly will do pretty much anything to keep the ball in play. The officials have to expect the unexpected. If the ball comes down at the net, the R1 should look for visual help from the second referee for a possible ball-handling violation or a contact with the bottom of the net, and the second referee needs to be prepared to help and to step out big with any help in the form of an informal signal. If a player pins the ball against the cable or net, it's a violation, and the fault should be called. Also, the blocked spike may bounce back into the attacker.

If the attacker is near the net and has a hand or hands above or near net height, the contact is considered a block. If the attacker is entirely below the top of the net and is making no defensive motion to deflect the ball, the R1 may see this as the first team contact. Regardless, the key is to visualize these situations in advance to react in a way that reflects rule knowledge and understanding to make the correct call. And, it helps to have the rule application in hand to short-phrase an explanation of a call or non-call after the play if the floor captain inquires reasonably about the situation.

Still another situation involves a power block, where the ball is pushed straight down with force in any direction by the blocker's hands. The R1 has to ensure that the initial contact was made in front of the blocker and not directly over the blocker's head. If not, the blocker more than likely started the ball forward then changed its direction down, which is a violation that should be called.

Now, let's look at a power tip where the ball is pushed forward with force by the fingertips 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 violation. The R1 has to be alert for a catching action and throwing motion, a palming of the ball, a 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 violation.

Another challenge involves a player who "deep-dishes" a set, staying in downward contact with the ball, then releasing it upward. Contact in handling a ball must be brief. If not, the contact probably will be extended in either distance or time, and should be a violation. Ball-handling rules are general in nature. Understanding and putting into practice the spirit of the rule and its nuances is one of the more difficult tasks for volleyball referees to master. Developing competence in ball-handling judgment is essential for all referees.

This officiating skill cannot remain static, however. It must evolve to keep up with any rules 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 with which the official is comfortable and can apply with consistency throughout a match.

The article by Corny Galdones was published by the NFHS in June 2004 and clearly shows that the NFHS has changed its expectations of its officials in terms of ball handling. No one should get up on the stand in today's game without understanding these concepts.

### **Ball Control**

In another article entitled "**Ball Control - My View,**" respected national official Wally Hendricks offers a perspective that affirms the concept of "over control" (which is prolonged contact for high school volleyball) versus "under control" when looking at the first contact. Wally contends that if a ball is **over** controlled, this contact should be called a fault for staying on the hands too long. For example, if a player takes a very low ball with his hands in an ugly way but the ball goes straight forward or down, then it shouldn't be called over control (prolonged contact). If, however, the player is able to catch the ball (it make look pretty to beach players) and use his wrists to make a nice pass to the setter, then it should be called as over control (prolonged contact).

Wally recommends forgetting about trying to differentiate between multiple contacts and “rolling” on the first contact because this can't be done. He noted that – if we had super-slow motion – we would see all the balls that “roll” up a player’s arm are actually a series of contacts rather than prolonged contact. However, because the NFHS expects such handles called as prolonged-contact faults, these should be called as prolonged contact on a first contact, and an official should also call them illegal on any second or third ball as prolonged contact or multiple contacts, depending upon the angle for viewing the contact. The “broom ball” where the ball is contacted high and goes backwards on receiving a serve or an attack is typically a legal play on a first contact because the contact involves **under** control; these are multiple contacts, and the uglier the better for multiple contacts. However, if an official truly believe there was prolonged contact, NFHS wants these called as faults. Most are appropriately judged as multiple contacts, play on for the first ball and called for either multiple contacts or prolonged contact on a second or third contact.

Wally contends that the problem faced by those observing ball handling is that our minds will tell us “too long” but our eyes are often not good enough to discern multiple contacts from a prolonged contact. On second and third balls, **it doesn't matter**. Both multiple contacts and holding the ball too long are illegal. Wally’s point was that R1s should be very careful about calling prolonged contact on a ball that the official’s mind says was on the hands too long if it’s the 1st contact without a really good view, looking for help from the second referee when the player is not facing the . On second and third, there was surely a fault and it **needs to be call** – it only matters to the officials which fault gets called!

The problem encountered here is that errors in judgment in differentiating prolonged contact from multiple contacts are much more critical on the 1st ball than on the 2nd ball. Therefore, there is an inherent problem when officials are taught to judge 1st contacts in the same way as 2nd and 3<sup>rd</sup> contacts. This is wrong because it is so difficult to get consistent performance in distinguishing prolonged contact from multiple contacts when our eyes are not good enough to differentiate “rolling” from multiple contacts. Wally’s parting shot in his article was that if the “under control/over control method” is used, officials can be very consistent. He urges officials to basically try to drop the terms “lift” and “rolled” and replace them with “held” in thinking about prolonged contact. This judgment can be explained fairly easily to players/coaches who criticize calls and the concept allows greater consistency from official to official on 1st ball calls. That said, in Federation matches, prolonged contacts are still supposed to be called.

In a follow-up article in another national publication entitled “**Distinguishing Illegal Contacts from Double Contacts**,” Wally goes on to analyze further, contending that – when the rules changed to allow multiple contacts on the first ball – officials were instructed to call illegal contacts (prolonged contact) on first contact based on the following concept: if the official would call a ball a prolonged contact fault on second contact (for over control), then a fault should also be called if this were the first contact as well. Unfortunately, most officials have used the illegal contact signal for a wide variety of hand plays that don’t just include prolonged contact but also include some double contacts.

Should we be surprised that there is confusion among coaches and players about what will or should be called on the first ball? However, overall, R1s are now more consistent on first ball calls. Generally, the first ball is called an illegal contact only when the ball is held too long and, for NFHS, a prolonged contact fault is called. The challenge now is for first referees to do a better job of applying this distinction to calls on second and third balls. An illegal contact typically involves the ball being held/caught and then thrown.

Therefore, an illegal contact cannot occur on any ball that is in contact with a player for a short time. Illegal contacts will be over-controlled, resulting in prolonged contact, and generally come out with no spin in the direction that the player was attempting. Balls that are “under controlled” should be considered multiple contacts and should include all misplayed contacts that typically come out as a “helicopter” or in a direction that was not anticipated by the player. R1s probably need to call many more double contacts per match and many fewer illegal (prolonged) contacts than they are typically doing.

Officials should also remember that balls that are moving slowly will tend to rebound off a player’s arms only a short distance. From the first referee’s position, a ball that is played out of the net will appear to be on the player’s arm(s) for a long time if it makes a short rebound. This can appear as a ball “rolling” up the arm. A player can over control a ball with his hand. The ball might be caught between the arms or in the crook of the arm. But it cannot be caught on a straight arm or arms. Therefore, the R1 must be careful to allow short rebounds when players are playing the ball out of the net or at other times when the ball is coming to the player very slowly. Wally Hendricks’ guidance adds to our understanding of where we are as officials and what we need to do in improving how we call the game.

### **Overhand Receive of Serve/First Ball**

Especially in the past few years, coaches have taught and are teaching their teams to use the overhand pass for serve receive and to handle any first contact that is below the waist. Players are being taught this either as a supplement to bumping the ball or as a primary passing technique. Many officials are still in an adjustment period in dealing with the move from tight hands and players bumping the first ball to the loose hands typically associated with overhand passing of the first ball over the net, regardless of how hard the ball is hit. While this transition is taking place, officials probably have let more double hits play on even on second or third contact. This is the rollover effect. However, the rule change that removed multiple contacts as illegal when played with fingertip action did NOT change what is legal on the second or third contacts. Overall, officials probably need to tighten up a bit and make the setters work harder at getting into position to legally handle the second ball. In addition, officials need to do a better job of judging the third contact especially in terms of multiple contacts as the past two years have resulted in more and more balls "slopped" over the net on third contact and not being called. Remember that how first ball handles were supposed to change, not other contacts!

### **Fewer Hands Calls Being Made on Sets**

Rally scoring – with a point scored every time the ball is put into play except for a replay – has undoubtedly contributed to first referees making fewer hands calls on sets. In the side-out scoring game, tight ball-handling calls were the norm. When NFHS moved to rally scoring to match the way volleyball was being played in other venues, changes in ball handling were seen as integral to the game being played with rally scoring. However, while this has resulted in allowing more minor doubles to go uncalled as faults as intended, it appears that it also reduced the comfort zone of many long-time officials in determining which handles to allow and which to whistle. The influence of playing on off ugly first-ball handles which do not result in prolonged contact has seemingly permeated to fewer calls being made on second and third balls. Overall, many high school officials still need to find a good compromise that allows play on without sacrificing the ability to call ball-handling faults on the second and third contacts that should be called.

### **Anything Doesn't Go!**

Allowing "anything goes" has become somewhat of a problem for officials still struggling with the transition to the game of volleyball as it is played, taught and officiated by today's coaches, many of whom have players who play "club" volleyball part of the year and who are influenced by what they see in the college women's game. Our officials need to step up to the challenge and learn to set hands at a level that allows the players to play the game and that the official can call consistently from first rally to last. If the R1 is not going to want to call a minor double contact a handling fault on a set or third contact on set or match point, then he/she needs to allow that handle to play on throughout the match. This involves the R1 not setting hands so tight that he/she then has to make a call s/he doesn't want to make late in a tightly-contested match but to also not calling it so loose that ball-handling skill is taken out of the game. The charge here is to not take the set out of the hands of the athletes but also to call ball-handling faults that should be whistled when the match is on the line. Consistency and setting a reasonable level of hands is the key. Players will adjust if hands are called consistently. But today's officials are truly challenged to determine a reasonable level of calling hands that allows the set to flow without being over-whistled while still making calls on obvious ball-handling faults.

### **Summary**

Ball handling for first ball contacts for OHSBVA matches is now probably about 98 per cent similar to what's being called for USAV and NCAA matches. This means that the adjustment for girls who are playing JO volleyball under USAV rules from January through May and beyond is relatively minimal. However, there still are acknowledged differences that need to be handled with consistency. Coaches continue to expect calls for prolonged contact where the ball strongly rolls in the fingers on a first ball but also to play on (no call) for most first-ball mangles; this is probably one of the two greatest areas of contention in terms of ball-handling expectations for high school volleyball. It's not worth arguing whether this difference is a good one or a bad one. It's enough to acknowledge that many coaches still want some balls called as faults on a first contact.

To help make this type of call consistently, which helps teams/players adjust, the first referee needs to get a really good look at the body part with which the player is set to contact the ball including on the first contact. Prolonged contact is never legal but our skill is to know when a "mis-hit" ball represents prolonged contact and when it's a legal, multiple contact with play continuing. Again, consistency allows players to know how to play the ball, and inconsistency typically results in players losing confidence in knowing what will be called as an illegal contact.