

An Official's View

By Dr. Azmy

Getting Away With Bad Serves: *Whose Fault Is It?*

The scene is as follows: The TV cameras are on, and a semifinal or final match is taking place. Logically we have the best players in the tournament at this stage. Suddenly the umpire calls "*Fault.*" It is an illegal serve. After a while it happens again, and another point is given to the opponent. Then a point is taken from the other player. The spectators are confused, they are sitting too far away to see what is happening. They cannot hear the umpire. So they do not understand what is going on.

The gestures of the players indicate that they are obviously unhappy. One of them says to the umpire, "How come you are calling my serve as illegal? I have been serving all my life in this way, and nobody ever called it illegal."

On the other hand, the coach is furious. "Nobody called this serve illegal during the tournament, how come it is illegal now?" He runs to the Referee, and asks him to replace the umpire. The Referee comes to watch the match, and he finds that the umpire is right. The serve is not legal.

Now the coach runs to the tournament director complaining, "My player is going to lose, the umpire is biased against my player, and he will never come to this tournament again. I will take my players and pull out of the tournament." The next step is letters will be sent to the magazine. Articles will be written accusing the umpire of stifling the players, especially the young rising ones.

Let me share with you the following scenario, without mentioning any names. At a semifinal match the camera is on. The young girl is a rising star from China. When she serves she places the ball in her palm, and tosses the ball very high. The umpire calls a fault. The problem is that when she is tossing the ball, her hand with the ball drifts over the table.

We are sitting on a VIP stand close to the table with a tournament manager, an International Referee, and an ITTF representative. It is true that the hand with the ball drifts over the table. The girl, of course, is very unhappy with the call.

The manager screams, saying "Every time that red light on the TV camera goes on, an umpire will suddenly discover service faults."

The ITTF representative responds: "It does not really matter, the serve is illegal."

The manager: "But she is tossing the ball so high in the air."

The ITTF representative: "But her hand with the ball drifts over the table."

The manager: "That does not affect the opponent."

The ITTF representative: "You mean to tell me if a player breaks the rules, but the opponent is not affected, then play should continue, and the umpire should not call it?"

The manager: "How come no umpire called it during her previous matches? It is only when the camera is on that we get this jazz."

The ITTF representative: "You mean to tell me that this umpire should not call it because other umpires did not call it in the past?"

The manager: "This is a world-ranked player, and she must have been doing this all along, and other umpires did not call it."

The argument gets heated, and both of them are getting louder, and we finally have to ask them to lower their voices.

Now we get to the final, the same girl is playing, the whole scene is repeated again, and this

time the umpire is calling illegal serves on both players. Guess what? The same argument goes on again.

Several comments and explanations should be made. By the time we reach the semis and the final, usually a committee selects the best umpires to umpire those matches. Those umpires may not have umpired these players before. The troubling situation stems from the fact that umpires are not all umpiring the same. There is an inconsistency in umpiring and that is why many players do not face these situations except very late in their playing career. Add to this that many tournaments are run without umpires. Most players in practice matches do not force their opponents to follow the rules.

The biggest cause for violating the rules originates from the behavior of the coaches. Many of them feel that fussing about every rule, especially the serve rule, may stifle or discourage the progress of the player.

Once again, do not get surprised when you get an umpire who is doing his job correctly. It is not the umpire's fault. It is the inefficient umpiring, the silence of the coaches, and the lack of discipline to follow the rules on the part of the players.

I forgot to mention one thing. The player mentioned in the story above has another lethal serve which is perfectly legal. She resorts to it only when she is faulted more than once.

One cannot understand why a player expects to get away with illegal serves, when he/she knows how to serve perfectly legal serves.